



**The Politics of Cooking: Class,
Inequality and Power in *MasterChef*
*Australia***

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Abstract

Within the world of reality television, *MasterChef Australia* has been regarded by commentators as being remarkable for its non-confrontational nature and its collegiality. This study contests the benign nature of the program by examining expressions of power and authority within the television text. Drawing on a theoretical background of Marx, Weber, Barthes and Bourdieu, this thesis performs a detailed reading of Season 8 (2016) of *MasterChef Australia* with a view to revealing the politics and metaphorical class structures within the design of the on-screen scenario. It argues that *MasterChef Australia* exhibits and perpetuates traditional class structures and values within the professional cooking industry, and any non-confrontation and collegiality is associated with subservience and class inferiority. Paths are proposed for further research, especially in relation to gender-related expressions of power and authority.

Introduction

As a ‘foodie’ I was a late bloomer. Until well into my adulthood I regarded food and eating as a somewhat inconvenient necessity. At a point, for reasons unknown, I made a personal resolution to learn how to cook which blossomed into a mild obsession with food: its ingredients, its preparation, its presentation and consumption. I became a foodie in much the same style that Johnston and Baumann (2014) identify: interested in thinking and talking about food, that is, regarding food “as a subject for study, aesthetic appreciation, and knowledge acquisition” (p. 51).

But it was not until I happened upon *MasterChef Australia* (*MCA*) that my professional background and interest in media analysis began to form a frame of reference for my much more recent personal in food. *MasterChef Australia* gradually insinuated itself into our family television viewing habits. After a short time, we all (two adults and two teenagers) gathered regularly to watch *MCA* in the evening, scoffing at the failures of contestants and the pretensions of the judges while we scoffed (in another manner!) the mainly Italian- or Asian-inspired meals that I cooked as a result of much study and research into ‘real’ food and cooking.

As our family situation changed, the attraction of *MasterChef Australia* remained, even if only to we two adults. We had been drawn into the world of *MCA* with its dictates and dramas: crises over soufflés that stubbornly refused to rise; the curse of trying to cooking ‘proper’ risotto; disasters of under- or over-cooked meat (or “protein” as we came to think of it); emotional “melt-downs” in which contestants seemed to lose the will to live let alone compete in the competition; and, of course, what seemed to be increasingly harsh demands of the judges and the competition over which they presided. And we were not alone. *MCA* recorded staggering ratings in its first season and has been at least a solid performer ever since.

MasterChef Australia exploited a profitable amalgam of familiar television genres, synthesising food television conventions principally from Niki Strange’s *Cookery*—Educative and Personality categories of the cookery program genre

(Strange 1998: 301), characteristics of the reality television genre that had been gradually dominating television programming since the 1990s, and conventions from traditional game shows which were very familiar to television viewers. There were also elements of soap opera introduced via the construction of personalities, circumstances and aspirations that served to place contestants and judges as social agents within a well-defined on-screen world, a world presented as having at least some congruence with the broader social reality of the viewer.

MasterChef Australia

Straddling two developments in television programming — food as content and reality television program structure, *MasterChef Australia* (MCA) was introduced in Australia in 2009. This was the Australian, and arguably the most successful, version of the international *MasterChef* franchise that originated in the United Kingdom in 1990. The UK original has survived two different versions. Its original and relatively simple format (1990–2001) was based on heats, semi-finals and a final. After a four-year recess in the early 2000s it was revived with a modified format of heats and finals as *MasterChef Goes Large* (2005–08) and then re-named as *MasterChef* (2008– present) (UK Gameshows.com 2016).¹ Since then *MasterChef* has been franchised in more than 40 countries.² In 2010, the UK show began to feature audition cook-offs at the beginning of the season, a development introduced by *MasterChef Australia* in the previous year.

MasterChef Australia was introduced to Australian free-to-air television in 2009 in a format expanded from its parent's, principally by using a less pyramidal elimination process, instead relying on a weekly series of contests that eliminated two contestants per week. In its nine seasons to 2017, MCA has remained remarkably consistent in structure and remarkably resilient in its ratings. Ratings experienced a significant decline from 2010 until 2013 but since then the program has risen to maintain a healthy consistency. The Finale of

¹ There have also been spin-offs (modified versions) from the fundamental *MasterChef* program design: *Junior MasterChef* (featuring young contestants), *Celebrity MasterChef* (featuring non-food celebrities as contestants), *MasterChef: The Professionals* (featuring professional chefs). All of these have had Australian versions produced and broadcast, along with the Australian-only *MasterChef Australia All-Stars* (featuring past contestants). Apart from the first season of *Junior MasterChef*, none of the spin-offs rated as well as the parent MCA.

² See <https://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/MasterChef> for references to web pages associated with the international franchises. Accessed 24 July 2016.

MCA has rated second for its evening in each year except 2010 (eighth) and the second half of that episode — the announcement of the winner — has rated first, apart from 2010 (fifth) and 2017 (second) (TVtonight.com.au 2017). The ratings of its first season (2009) were enormous,³ even out-rating the behemoth of commercial television ratings, the State of Origin rugby league games (Knox (2009)).⁴

MasterChef Australia follows a relatively strict weekly format for most of the season, with variations being made as the contestants become fewer. On Sunday contestants face a Mystery Box Challenge — a selection of ingredients kept secret until the start of the cooking period — or other test to determine three contestants to cook for an advantage, and three to cook to avoid possible elimination. Monday is then devoted to a Pressure Test in which the three worst performers from Sunday competitively cook from an exemplar provided by a guest chef; the worst version of the dish ‘sends the contestant home’.

During the Monday or Tuesday contests, there may be the offer of a Power Apron — the winner of a particular part of a challenge is offered an advantage over others in a subsequent contest. The advantage is talked of by the judges as being ‘significant’ or ‘a game changer’, but is rarely more than the choice of ingredients or of partners in a group activity. Often the holder of the Power Apron will, in fact, realise no advantage. On Tuesday, the three top performers from Sunday cook in an Immunity Challenge, to select one who then cooks against a professional chef. The contestant competes for a ‘pin’ that provides immunity from having to compete in a future Pressure Test, therefore avoiding potential elimination, while the professional chef cooks to “maintain their reputation”. Success by the contestant is uncommon, but possible enough to maintain drama in the contest. Wednesday is taken up with a Team Challenge, in which the contestants are made to cook in groups — sometimes arbitrarily composed, sometimes not — in a specific ‘commercial’ situation, usually outside the *MCA* kitchen. These challenges range from *à la carte* service to food market stalls and

³ For example, in mid-season, *MCA* attracted 2.1 million viewers (TVtonight.com.au 2009b) and its finale swept the ratings with 3.74 million viewers (TVtonight.com.au 2009a). The announcement of the winner of Season 2 exceeded even these with 5.7m viewers Australia-wide.

⁴ Remarkably, it has been, and remains, very popular in India. See, for example, *The Times of India* (2017), and also Andrews (2016).

food trucks. The worst performing team is then subjected to an Elimination Challenge on Thursday, to select three worst performers from the losing team who then cook off, with one being eliminated.

In early seasons, the *MCA* judges conducted Masterclasses that were broadcast on Fridays, but in later seasons these were reduced in number and broadcast immediately after Thursday's Elimination Challenge.

Aims and Scope

The aim of this study is to examine, elucidate and “politicise” (as Barthes 1957b would have it) the expressions of class, power and authority in *MasterChef Australia (MCA)*. The foundations of class theory used as a guide are those of Karl Marx especially with reference to class structures made inherent by economics and labour (Marx 1887). Max Weber's understanding of class, *Stände* and parties (Weber 2010) is also introduced as a conceptual connection between Marx and Pierre Bourdieu's fluid approach to capital (Bourdieu 1986b). The seminal semiological work of Roland Barthes is recalled and reapplied, especially his theory of myth, or “depoliticised speech” (Barthes 1957b). The seminal proxemics research of Edward T. Hall (Hall 1966) is also used as a method for ‘reading’ the spatial arrangements of both the animate and inanimate in the world of *MCA*. Such a reading may be used as an exemplar for further analysis in the elucidation of embedded sign-signification-myth systems within other reality television (RTV) programs or within other television genres, encouraging the re-examination of assumptions about the personal politics projected by such programs.

This study is not centrally concerned with food studies, as such. Of primary interest and focus is the portrayal of power relationships in a form that purports to have congruence with a broader socio-political context, thus serving as either, or both, an exemplar or justification of the political *status quo* in the restaurant industry. As such, this research could extend to the examination of the internal world of non-food related media programs. *MasterChef Australia* is an appropriate subject because it is popular, and resides within a combination of content and concept that currently dominates broadcast television in Australia — food and reality television.

Thesis Outline

This study explores the thesis of *MasterChef Australia* being a metaphoric representation of class and its related privilege of authority and status. A particular focus is on a close examination of the on-screen world of *MCA* rather than the issues concerning the audience and viewing of the world. This “reading” is related to the external world as a purveyor of structures of power and class.

Chapter 2 reviews the literature on RTV and its manifestation with food and cooking as content. Particular attention is focused on expressions of class and authority in RTV. *MasterChef Australia* is placed within that context of research.

Chapter 3 provides an outline of the background theory and the method used in the analysis of *MasterChef Australia* as a text. The reintroduction of the work of Roland Barthes and its relation to some of the work of Pierre Bourdieu is emphasised.

Chapter 4 provides an analysis — a “reading” — of *MCA* season 8 (2016), relating aspects of the on-screen world of the program to power, authority and class, especially in the development of character and socio-political personae. Of particular interest and importance in this context are ‘back stories’ (food dreams), food preparation (ingredients, cuisine and cooking techniques) and presentation (both personal and of food). Of particular interest is the introduction of the seminal work of Edward T. Hall in proxemics — the social use of space — which leads this study towards an exploratory examination of gender relationships in *MCA*.

Chapter 5 summaries and presents conclusions drawn from the analysis. Here I provide suggestions for further research, particularly in relations to gender.

Appendices give a shot-by-shot reference for three sequences of emotional breakdown discussed in the analysis.

Literature Review

Food and Reality Television

Two significant developments in television programming in the past 20 years are reality television (RTV) and food television. Both have been attractive elements in free-to-air television's fight for survival against internet-distributed media products.⁵ Annette Hill, among others (for example, Ouellette 2014; Biressi and Nunn 2005; Edwards 2013), notes that as a phenomenon worthy of study RTV attracted relatively little scholarly interest until around the turn of the twenty-first century (Hill 2005). By then, the rapid rise in programming time given over to RTV, and the increasingly clarity of the genre, had it demand more attention. Television producers were quick to recognise the audience appeal of the dramatic tension produced by the incongruity of seemingly unremarkable people being thrust into unfamiliar, unpredictable or culturally confronting situations. Early RTV successes such as *Survivor* (Castaway, 1997–present) opted for all three of these challenges. It adopted the scenario of castaways marooned on an otherwise uninhabited island and their survival through cooperation within, and competition between, 'tribes' — perhaps akin to, for example, the premise of William Golding's novel *Lord of the Flies*. However this was a departure from the seminal *The Real World* (MTV 1992–2017, since 2014 simply *Real World*), and its competitor *Big Brother* (Endemol, 1999–present),⁶ Both aimed at a younger adult audience — precisely the MTV's target audience since its beginning — by mimicking the 'natural' circumstance for under-30 adults sharing a house, complete with house chores, food budgets and personal strategies to enhance one's status within the social microcosm of the house.

In parallel during the late 1990s, as Isabelle de Solier points out, lifestyle television, especially in Australia, was making a transition from 'how-to-live' programming to almost exclusively food programming — particularly pointed towards amateur food connoisseurs, a "... foodie boom, which uses lifestyle

⁵ By the first half of 2017, RTV's ability to sustain a free-to-air television network may be starting to wane — although running highly successful RTV programs *MasterChef Australia* and *The Bachelor*, the Ten Network was placed in receivership amid a share trading halt on 14 June 2017. Ten's *Survivor* has also struggled in 2017 (see Dyer 2017).

⁶ Though *Big Brother* has not run in Australia since 2014, it continues in the US as well as other countries, see for example, http://www.cbs.com/shows/big_brother/. Accessed 21 August 2017.

television to produce a population of foodie-citizens” (de Solier 2008: 65).⁷ Lifestyle television, as such, could be seen as having recovered somewhat since de Solier’s time of writing, especially via reality programs outside a strictly food theme — some address ‘house and home’, such as *The Block* (Watercress Productions and Cavalier Productions 2003–04, 2010–present), *House Rules* (Seven Network 2013–present), and the short-lived *The Renovators* (Shine 2011); others focus on health and obesity, such as *The Biggest Loser* (Crackerjack Productions 2006; FremantleMedia Australia 2006–10; Shine Australia 2011–present); and ‘makeover’ RTV concentrates on personal transformation, for example, *The Biggest Loser* (Network Ten 2006–present). Thus, rather than lifestyle television rising again in an integrated presentation, it has been differentiated by RTV into specialised segments — for example, house and home (and practical skills), personal transformation, change of life situation (‘sea’ and ‘tree’ changes), and cooking. Characteristically, these specialisations have incorporated elements of other television genres, especially documentary, soap opera, gameshow, and competition as well as other RTV specialisations (Hill 2005). The difference between game show and competition is that the competition genre pits the personal skills of participants against each other in a scenario that closely resembles a social situation external to the television production itself, as with the *Idol* franchise (FreemantleMedia 2011–present) which mimics musical audition as an industry activity. On the other hand, game shows assess the performance of participants in a particular game that is usually unique and specifically constructed for the television program and its presentation. Many RTV programs (including *MasterChef Australia*) occupy an hybrid of these two sub-genres, which can be uneasy, depending upon the congruence of the RTV scenario with its external counterpart. As a result, hybrid RTV programs have appeared, such as *The Osbournes* (MTV 2002–2005) as celebrity–documentary–soap opera, *Survivor* (Castaway 1997–present) as a game show–soap opera–competition and the *MasterChef* franchise (BBC and many others 1990–present)

⁷ Even mainstream lifestyle programs such as *Better Homes and Gardens* have enlisted and promoted celebrity chefs, for example Karen Martini and Ed Halmagyi. The combination of foodism and travel in television programs is very common — examples include British ex-patriot Italians Gennaro Contaldo and Antonio Carluccio (BBC), and Giorgio Locatelli (BBC), who explore their homeland. Others, such as British chef Rick Stein (BBC), travel as foodist tourists. In Australia, there have been foodist tourists Maeve O’Meara (SBS), and Adam Liaw (SBS), winner of *MasterChef Australia*, Season 2.

as cooking–game show, with overtones of personal transformation. But as Robin Nabi points out, this straddling of characteristics is very fluid (Nabi 2007: 374).

One fundamental of RTV is the ‘ordinary’. And rather than complying with Bonner’s view of ‘the content of television [calling] on ordinary, everyday concerns and patterns of behaviour’ (Bonner 2003: 32), RTV dotes on the observation, for the purposes of entertainment, of reactions and behaviour of people, who are represented as unremarkable, to circumstances that can be either every day or highly unfamiliar. Skeggs and Wood observe that “[w]hereas people ‘in’ the media were out of reach and belonged to a set of privileged elites, now the reliance [is] on so-called ‘ordinary’ people as participants in all manner of games, trials and transformations ...” (Skeggs and Wood 2011: 7). As a result, RTV creates class divisions as a part of its core — the ‘ordinary’ participants are outsiders from the television production world and, as such, are cast against the traditional acting elite, and against the controllers and interpreters of the rules by which the program will be played out. In regarding this as entertainment, Susie Khamis suggests that “it is contestants’ ordinariness (they enter as cement renderers, surf lifeguards, financial planners, and legal secretaries) that viewers identify with” (Khamis 2013: 3). I contend that rather than gaining satisfaction from watching people who are as ‘ordinary’ as themselves, RTV viewers are invited to engage with the neoliberal fantasies of transformation of others by watching the stressful and embarrassing reactions and behaviour of people in situations within which they are ill-suited and incompetent, either through personal characteristics, social class or both. RTV participants fail within the rules of the on-screen world through over-reaching their social position, that is, stepping from their ordinary existence into public persona and high social exposure — the province of the acting elite. And if they succeed within that on-screen world, they do so through the transformative effects of having attained celebrity status. In the main, RTV (particularly in its game show hybrid) is a demonstration of failure — many more participants fail than succeed. So RTV programs are particular forms in the service of justifying and reinforcing social class distinctions and legitimising the status quo regarding the distribution and exercise of power and authority.

Food Television as Reality

Strange (1998) mapped a brief taxonomy of food television which survives now as a partial coverage of the genre of food television. Her survey preceded the meteoric rise of food television since the turn of the century, especially in its game show format, but her categories can still find candidates on broadcast television in 2017. Her categories are:

- *Cookery–Educative*, which refers to direct instruction usually involving demonstration; largely historical now but, for example, Matt Okine’s *Short Cuts to Glory* (ABC, 2017)
- *Personality*, in which the identity of the presenter is of significant entertainment or attraction; for example, Nigella Lawson’s *Simply Nigella* (BBC2, 2015–present)
- *Tour–Educative*, where cooking is melded with travelogue, that is, a journey or location is a significant contributor to the program; for example, *Italy Unpacked* by chef Giorgio Locatelli and art historian Andrew Graham-Dixon (BBC, 2013–15).
- *Raw–Educative*, in which the narrative of the program concentrates more on the stories behind raw ingredients ; for example, Matthew Evans’ *Gourmet Farmer* (SBS 2010–present)

In accord with changes of sub-genres in more general reality television, Strange’s categories can now be seen in hybrid formats. For example, SBS’s series *Food Safari* exhibits characteristics of all four of Strange’s categories — practical demonstrations of cooking specific dishes are shown (Cookery–Educative); Maeve O’Maera is a presenter who interviews, samples and explains but never cooks (Personality); the series covers national cuisines and their Australian manifestations (Tour–Educative); and the series periodically explores the origin and sources of the raw ingredients that are used in the cookery (Raw–Educative). Examples of programs that are purely Cookery–Educative are now relatively rare.

Isabelle De Solier’s observations of the changing nature of the social influence of food television have stood remarkably well over the past eight years (de Solier 2008). Since the 2009 debut of *MCA*, the cultivation of foodism has

been remarkable, especially in the spectacular rise in number of food media texts and the popularity of food festivals. Taking Tasmania — Australia's smallest state — as an example, the number and popularity of food and wine festivals is remarkable and growing. A Tourism Tasmania website lists 11 annual festivals (Tourism Tasmania 2016); this in an island state with a population of just over 500,000. All of these food and wine festivals receive some state and/or local government support, and enormous public patronage, and they emphasise de Solier's point that interest in food and wine has become increasingly popular, at least within social classes that have the necessary economic and social capital. This interest has also become increasingly refined, that is, the degree of sophistication expected of patrons, and shown by them, has risen markedly. This increase in refinement of taste in social events and, especially food television, seems to have not been accompanied by an increased interest in healthy eating (see Phillipov 2012) but whether it has become more politically charged, as de Solier suggests (de Solier 2008: 78), is debatable, despite the rise of the Slow Food movement and its ambition to translate pleasure and taste into political influence (Pietrykowski 2004). The commercialisation of food television, and in particular, *MCA*, has been also been examined (for example, Lewis and Phillipov 2016; Phillipov 2016), but despite Tania Lewis' discussion of selfhood, identity and class (Lewis 2011), *MCA* has attracted little attention in regard to the portrayal and projection of authority, power and social class within the program's world itself. It is precisely this portrayal and projection, especially in its covert support of neoliberal ideology, that this study pursues.

MasterChef Australia

Differences between versions of *MasterChef* — comparing UK, US and Australia — have been discussed by Louann Haarman (Haarman 2015), especially pointing to differences in the roles played by judges. She contrasts the mentoring and almost paternal nurturing of contestants by the Australian judges with the more distant authority of the UK and US judges (pp. 162–163). Monica Bednarek (Bednarek 2013: 91) also comments on this. Both authors attempt to elucidate the 'rules of the game' and point to collegiality and egalitarianism in the Australian *MasterChef*. However, much runs counter to this socially integrative

reading. Seale (2012) points to the exploitation of participants for cheap amateur labour in the context of a high-budget, highly profitable production and also the distinction that is maintained between professional and amateur. This introduces the issue of identity construction and reconstruction within the program (Khamis 2013; Lewis 2011), which could be productively extended by engaging Bourdieu's theories of habitus, symbolic capital and social practice in analysing the 'ordinariness' of contestants and any personal transformation (Bourdieu 1986a). Also, attention needs to be focused on the firm divisions that the *MCA* maintains between 'professional' and 'amateur' and the relatively low incidence of direct movement from participating in *MCA* to employment in professional kitchens — often a part of aspirational food dreams. Further, the governmentality and community functions of *MCA* have been discussed — for example, in public health (Phillipov 2012; Vander Schee and Kline 2013) and even in policing and leadership (Etter and others 2010). *MCA* also fits into Laurie Ouellette's more general discussions on reality television and good citizenship (Ouellette 2010; Ouellette and Hay 2008a; Ouellette and Hay 2008b).

Annette Hill quotes Ib Bondebjerg's, " 'three basic sub-forms of reality TV: the docu-soap ('characterised by a link to reality through its characters and settings'); the reality-magazine ('presenting cases from real life, mostly about crime and accidents, or other spectacular human interest stories'); and the reality show ('a serialized form of game show where ordinary people are put in extraordinary situations in order to cooperate with and compete against one another')" (Bondebjerg 2002, quoted in Hill 2005: 47–48). *MasterChef Australia's* UK parent very easily resided within the third of these three sub-genres. Its basic premise was the challenging of 'ordinary' contestants with extraordinary cooking tasks, with the structure of the competition (elimination heats) and the tasks calling for the immediate demonstration of skills already developed. There was no allowance for or expression of an individual's journey. Distinct from its parent, *MCA* relies heavily on personal narrative and neoliberal lifestyle 'makeover', hybridising all three of Bondebjerg's sub-genres and, in the process, exceeding *MasterChef UK* in ratings success. *MasterChef Australia* is persistent in presenting the contestants as real-life characters who speak of personal narratives (expressions of habitus); it presents its case from real life, albeit a

particular and mythologised version of professional cooking (expression of social practice); and it is structured as a game show, with prizes and celebrity to be won and the embarrassment of failure along the way (expressing the accumulation or loss of symbolic capital) (Bourdieu 1986a).

MasterChef Australia's professed primary purpose is to assist contestants in pursuing their individual 'food dreams' via a cooking competition in which contestants are progressively eliminated until one, the winner, remains. The competition is presided over by three regular judges: Gary Mehigan, George Calombaris and Matt Preston.⁸ The first two are trained chefs and restaurant entrepreneurs who have progressed through their careers in professional cooking and hospitality via an apprenticeship, working as chefs under well-known executive chefs, and subsequently establishing restaurants of their own. Calombaris worked under Mehigan as an apprentice during his early career. They now both currently run restaurants more as hospitality entrepreneurs than chefs. Matt Preston is a print media food journalist having risen through entertainment journalism. In *MCA*, the judges take on the roles of mentors, task masters and absolute arbiters of taste and excellence. Generally (but not definitively), Mehigan adopts a more mentorial role; Calombaris deals far more with discipline and 'tough love'; Preston tends to raise questions of taste, refinement and excellence. These distinctions between the judges are very flexible, and especially noticeable is Preston's increasing engagement in technical discussions and cooking demonstrations in later seasons.

Over the course of the competition, celebrity judges are introduced, sometimes for a week at a time. British chefs Heston Blumenthal and Marco Pierre White regulars in this, but other guests include well-known cooks, chefs and media personalities such as Maggie Beer, Nigella Lawson, Yotam Ottolenghi and Curtis Stone. These associations with external celebrity chefs have not been without problems. Prior to the broadcast of Season 8 (2016) *MCA* judge George Calombaris was forced to hose down rumours that he had objected to the

⁸ In the first series of *MCA*, proceedings were hosted by Sarah Wilson, a popular magazine journalist with interests in food and alternative health. In this series, Wilson presided over 'evictions' voted on by the contestants. In subsequent series evictions were discontinued and the role of the host dispensed with, those duties taken up by the three judges.

inclusion of Nigella Lawson as a guest celebrity chef: “But up until now, [Lawson’s success] didn’t cut a lot of mustard with Calombaris. He’s a qualified chef, Lawson a home cook, and never the twain shall meet” (Vickery 2016). As will be discussed further, this attitude exemplifies Calombaris’ attitude to class distinction within the professional food industry.

As reality television, *MasterChef Australia* purports to be a *mimesis* of the external world. It is presented as a reproduction of situations, circumstances, and relationships —both social and professional, but also socio-political — that, in some way, exist in the day-to-day world of professional cooking, outside RTV, and specifically, within the restaurant industry. As such, this mimetic representation serves as a justification and rationale of the world that it imitates. Even the term ‘reality television’ itself serves to propose a congruence between the world portrayed within the television production and the external social world from which it is derived. But the physical setting undermines any correspondence with the external world. The *MCA* television set resembles a commercial kitchen in only the most superficial way. Professional appliances and accessories are available to contestants, but when the show’s activities move to commercial premises, as they often do, the difference in physical setting is stark. But more importantly, relationships and motivations are far from those of a commercial setting. The contestants are competitive, regardless of any collegiality and camaraderie, all must be aware throughout that contestants will be regularly eliminated and that there can be only one winner.

Masterchef Australia is also presented as a *metonym* of the broader social world. That is, it purports to be closely associated with, even a part of, the respectively broader social spaces (in Bourdieuan terms) of the restaurant industry, hospitality industry, working places in general, and wider social world. Further, it then takes on a broader legitimacy of, not just being part of those social spaces, but *standing for* them. The judges are represented as leading and influential figures in the broader world of food, cooking and restaurants. Voice-over introductions extol their virtues and achievements and contestants constantly obsequiously dwell on their talents and their advice. Although often contestants follow their own ideas, they always do with great trepidation. The contestants are presented as talented, but ‘typical’, Australians who harbour ambitions

within the world represented by the judges. Their address to the camera/audience are very often underlined with on-screen supers declaring their age and their occupation. The emphasis is always that these people are not food experts. Personal stories are presented in cutaways showing the contestants as they purportedly are every day, with family, at work, at leisure, and cooking in domestic setting. Each group's behaviour, aspiration, and justifications — their demonstrated and implied habitus, in Bourdieu's terms (see, for example, Lizardo 2004) — then represents that of the social groups they purport be a part of and to represent.

Haarman (2015) attributes the success of *MCA* largely to multiple narrative journeys and engaging with the audience's sense of national and cultural identity. Earlier, Turner (2005) pointed to the transformation of the *Big Brother* franchise in the Australian context by the adoption of a personal narrative, but also — and equally importantly — using Australian narrative strategies by emphasising the “upbeat, sunny, community oriented”, and building “suburbanality” into the show's setting. Roscoe (2001) quotes Australian *Big Brother* executive producer Peter Abbott as trying to “emulate the pace and the grammar of the soap opera much more than anyone else has done. We are using voice over to truncate, we're editing to truncate” (p. 480). The attraction of this approach for audiences is possibly through its connection with mainstream Australian soap operas such as *Home and Away* and *Neighbours* that, for many years, have emphasised such ‘sunny suburbanality’. Roscoe also notes that the producers of the Australian version of *Big Brother* felt that the participants were less interested in personal, or even collective, success than their international counterparts (p.477). Bignell sees Roscoe's evaluation as the Australian participants tending to live out myths of Australian culture with leisure interests, pursuing fun and ‘matey bonding’ (Bignell 2005: 55). This view was also taken of *MCA* by the popular press (for example, Penberthy 2009) and has been subsequently been adopted in a large part of the scholarly attention accorded to the program (Bednarek 2013; Haarman 2015; Lewis 2011; Lewis 2008: 455). *MCA* has been generally accepted and commented on for its ‘collegial’ and ‘non-confrontational’ nature, distinguishing it from international versions of the franchise, especially the UK and American versions. Lewis (2011) and

Bednarek (2013) have noted the unique *MCA* strategy of emphasising a camaraderie between the contestants, regardless of the fundamental tenet of *MCA*'s format that each week two contestants will be competitively eliminated from the competition, and that there can be only one winner.

Alternatively, Seale (2012) emphasises the essential opposition in *MCA* between amateur and professional, both of which exclude the ordinary: "In MasterChef, the drama of the makeover is driven not only by negotiations between ordinary and expert, but by negotiations between amateur and professional" (p. 33), the "ordinary" implying an unskilled and uneducated approach, the "amateur" embodying a practised but unmediated competence. I go further: in makeover RTV the expert generally demonstrates to the ordinary what can be done and how it can be done; but in *MCA*, the professional stands in judgement of the competence of the amateur, detailing the shortcomings of the latter and emphasising the differences between the two. In this case, the ordinary has already been excluded via auditions and other selection processes. This is acknowledged during the program with frequent references to the contestants as "the best Australian amateur cooks". It is also emphasised by the cohort of contestants being relatively well-educated both professionally and in *MCA*'s dominant culinary expectations.

The argument of this thesis is in direct contradiction to the collegial view of *MCA*. I contend that, despite its reputation as collegial and non-confrontational, despite its self-professed aims of makeover and self-actualisation for contestants, and despite its appeal to the display of the ordinary, *MCA* reinforces structures of inequality, power and privilege — that is, class — within the hospitality industry and broader society. *MCA* characterises professional cooking as highly hierarchical, authoritarian, male-dominated and heavily normative, and presents this as socially and professionally appropriate; it also exemplifies RTV's tendency to depict an alternative reality based on a construction by producers and, by this, attempts to superimpose itself on the social world it purports to represent. In *MCA*, the distinction and distance between classes within the social environment of professional cooking is displayed and justified. As a result, I contend that *MCA* occupies the position of a socio-political protagonist and advocate in matters of class, social hierarchy and mobility, supporting and defending the status quo.

In attempting to raise culinary excellence to an importance that transcends mundane reality — and in the process similarly elevating *MCA* — viewers are regularly reminded, via subtitles, of the contestants' occupations in the outside world, in their life before *MCA*. This labelling establishes the motivation of the individual. A label of, for example, lawyer, impresses that the contestant is so strongly motivated that they are prepared to jettison a great deal of capital — economic, social and cultural — to pursue their food dream and that being a lawyer inferior. Second, the label demonstrates the extent of the individual's fall in entering *MCA* — in their external social life they are presumed to have been prosperous, authoritative and important, but in the world of *MCA* we see them as lower class, surviving only by satisfying the judges, and facing any failure being ultimate failure, emphasised by the oft-repeated observation by contestants that “this could send me home”. Contestants have been prepared to socially and economically humble themselves in the pursuit of their food dream — a culinary career overshadows all others. Other labels carry their own significance: “stay-at-home-mum”⁹ shows a reaching out beyond even the satisfaction of parenthood; “retail assistant” and “call centre worker” conjures a picture of the humdrum, an employment rut to which no-one would aspire. Third, the stripping away of social capital from contestants emphasises the position of the judges as pinnacles of neoliberal achievement in the professional food industry. The connotation is that by this, people like the judges have a freedom of personal expression, a freedom of social practice, and hence a path to self-actualisation. But to attain this entails — and the implication is more broadly within the professional food industry — unquestioning subjugation to authority. Occasionally contestants will challenge this, preparing or designing specific dishes against the advice of the judges. This is successful sometimes, establishing the creative abilities of the contestant, but more often the judges' warnings are justified in their assessment of the final dish.

Despite persistent themes and narratives of home, family and “cooking with love”, the food imagined and prepared in the *MasterChef Australia* kitchen is

⁹ For convenience, I have named this and its other *MCA* euphemisms “parent” in the analysis that follows.

indisputably *haute cuisine*.¹⁰ The style entails extensive modification of ingredients, painstaking technique and skills, and, especially in its modern expression, expensive specialised equipment. The contemporary expressions of *haute cuisine* are the often minimalist *nouvelle cuisine* and the pseudo-scientific and intensely technical *molecular gastronomy*.

Nouvelle cuisine was popularised in the 1960s and 70s by food critics Henri Gault, Christian Millau and André Gayot. It departed from *cuisine classique* by emphasising such things as freshness of ingredients and modern techniques while abandoning traditional heavy sauces and meat marinades. *Nouvelle cuisine* also pursued inventiveness, creativity and unique combinations of flavours, which arguably quickly digressed into an over-emphasis on presentation. All three of the *MCA* judges commonly espouse the basic tenets of *nouvelle cuisine*, while dwelling on presentation.

Molecular gastronomy or, as it has been re-defined by adherent Ferran Adrià, *techno-emotional cuisine*, is also recognisable in the dictates and expectations of the *MCA* judges (see, for example, Preston 2008). Originating from a purely scientific interest in the composition of food and the chemical processes of cooking this cuisine evolved as an amalgam of *nouvelle cuisine*'s interest in innovation and creativity and the intense study of cooking as a chemical process. Championed by Adrià and disciples such as Heston Blumenthal, techno-emotional cuisine has produced cooking and presentation styles that quite often stretch the imagination of the diner — unlikely flavour combinations (for example, bacon ice cream, or the ashes of burnt peaches), deceptive presentation (for example, savoury entrees fashioned into the form of confectionery) and pseudo-scientific techniques (for example, transformation into foam, freezing with liquid nitrogen, extremely low cooking temperatures).¹¹ In earlier seasons, George Calombaris introduced some of these techniques,¹² and the ideas and assumptions behind the philosophy have remained. Heston Blumenthal, an

¹⁰ Haute cuisine is a culinary style originating in the French *ancien regime* which survived the French Revolution to become a profound global influence in both cooking and eating.

¹¹ Described in the popular press as a food preparation style that is characterised by 'drying, liquefying, gassing, freezing and generally transforming ingredients into surprising new forms and textures while maintaining the flavours' (The Age 2003).

¹² See for example, The Age (2003) for an introduction to George Calombaris' interpretation of *techno-emotional cuisine*.

active adherent of the cuisine has been a regular guest on *MCA*, often impressing the tenets of techno-emotional cuisine on contestants.

Rachel Laudan, in her discussion of culinary history, emphasises the hierarchy in cuisine and cooking of ancient times — that to pursue complexity in the transformation of raw ingredients has for millennia been established as the legitimate province of nobility in transcending ‘ordinary’ existence (Laudan 2013). Pinkard (2009) also traces a long tradition of pursuit of complexity in European culinary practice. Beginning from dietetics and medicine, the well-to-do European meal evolved into a succession of dishes, the sequence of which remained girt by Hippocratic ideas of good medical and dietetic practice (pp. 21–22). Of course, serving more than one dish at a meal was not a luxury afforded by poor working people whose access to ingredients was extremely limited. When multiple courses were served, often the first was a soup comprising the liquid in which ingredients of the second and third courses were cooked — many recipes with a peasant heritage note this as a serving suggestion.¹³

Food deemed suitable for nobility characteristically used techniques that heavily processed ingredients, often transforming them far beyond recognition. Laudan (2013) cites François Marin, reputed to be the author of *Les Dons de Comus* (1739), as declaring cooking as chemistry whose goal is to analyse, digest and extract, “drawing out the light and nourishing juices, together ... a harmony of all the tastes together” (p. 218). And indeed, the rise of mingling and blending them in restaurants, as we know them, came via the popularity of restorative bouillons in the eighteenth century (Laudan 2013: 218, and Spang 2000: 68), finished products far removed from the physical characteristics of their basic ingredients. The tradition of elaborate presentation of food being emblematic of superiority and social dominance has a long and continuing history in ruling class culture, and in the process, ingredients are commonly redefined by their transformation to food. Contemporary gourmet dining is a natural descendant of these earlier excesses of the culinary practices of the nobility. Both quantity and

¹³ An example of this is the Spanish *cocido*, in which meat, chickpeas and vegetables are boiled and served as three courses — soup (the broth); entrée (beans and vegetables); main (meat) (Lang 1988: 277–278). In French cuisine, *pot-au-feu* is cooked and served in a similar manner (Lang 1988: 837).

quality of presentation of food were used, for example, in displays of wealth and power from ancient times. From Petronius Arbiter's *Cena Trimalchionis* to Boccaccio's *Decameron*, food and its presentation have been regarded as metaphors of authority, power and class (Palma 2013: Introduction). Even today, celebrity chefs create and maintain social and cultural capital through sometimes bizarre exhibitions of culinary spectacle.

The culinary style that is defined, and even imposed, by the *MCA* judges pursues this same complexity, innovation and spectacle. Often reference is made to “pretty” plating and other aesthetic considerations in arranging food for serving, — this is especially noticeable in the theme dining settings of guest judge Heston Blumenthal and the complex and intricate desserts introduced for reproduction during challenges. Such aesthetics sit firmly within the world of aristocracy and emphasise the differences not only between ordinary and amateur cooking but also between amateur cooking — that which we see in Week 1 auditions — and professional cooking, which are progressively revealed and elucidated over the season. In the process, we are shown — implicitly have proved for us — that *MCA*, its judges and its processes reveal an absolute in the nature of professional culinary practices and aesthetics.

Class Theory and MasterChef Australia

Beverly Skeggs and Helen Wood point out that “*all* [media] representations [are] at some level always about class” (2011: 1),¹⁴ that this is particularly the case for television and its stories of ‘ordinary’ people, and sometimes there has been a reluctance within media studies and sociology to focus on this. But additionally, all representations of the commodification of food, social food practices and their symbolic character are about class, whether in distinctions in taste, the privilege of authority or perceived life chances — fundamentally the social environment and experience that enables and denies social and cultural capital (Bourdieu 1986b).

¹⁴ In this light, even news broadcasts are about social class. Decisions are made in showing, or not, events from particular viewpoints, and sometimes — for example, in current affairs — emphasising the damaging effects of actions of the ruling class on the working class, or alternatively denigrating the working class.

The majority of class analyses of reality television have concerned themselves with the representation of individuals of broader external (to the world of the program) social classes. Skeggs and Wood (2011) emphasise the normalisation of middle-class values, reinforcing working class stereo-types and exploitation (pp. 15–17). Eriksson (2015) explores the ways in which “ordinary participants are presented as flawed or pathological consumers and become signifiers of a morally flawed lifestyle” in a Swedish docu-soap, and Skeggs (2009) examines ways in which “self-transformation ‘reality’ television programmes” over-recruit working class participants as “inadequate, deficient and requiring improvement” (p. 626) and these participants “appear to display and dramatise themselves as inadequate, in need of self-investment” (p. 638).

This study is not about class in that way. The concern here is the presentation, via reality television, of professional cooking as a metaphor for power hierarchies, mythologising these hierarchies as ‘natural’ phenomena, external to social construction. That is, in *MCA* the authority and power hierarchies of the professional culinary world (as purported to exist by, and as represented within, *MCA*) become a form of “depoliticised speech” (Barthes 1957b: 254–256). By this, Barthes refers to the alienation of a signifier and its signified from the history of their social connection, that is, they become bound as one unit of speech, and are that which is “taken for granted” and “what goes without saying” (Barthes 1957b). The relationship between the signifier and its signifier is regarded, therefore, as existing in nature, and is treated as unquestionable as the relationship between clouds and rain. In *MCA*, social practices, as far-reaching and diverse as personal crisis counselling to traditional ethnic culinary methods, are naturalised — taken from the realm of human creation and social practice — and facilitate the establishment and maintenance of myths of power and authority.

In furthering their argument on television’s inherent interest in class, Skeggs and Wood point out that class is clearly visible in reality television in a number of ways: the denigration of RTV and its implications for assumptions about participants and viewers; that the prominence of the ‘ordinary’ in RTV creates a confusion over ‘culture’, as such, effectively publicly raising debates about post-modern interests in ‘low’ culture and its artefacts, and the elitism of ‘high’

culture; conjuring suggestions of ‘authenticity’, unleashing issues such as romanticisation of poverty and subsequent entrenchment of class distinctions; the over-representation and exploitation of contestants; and inventing the myth of social mobility via competition, while ignoring the subsequent rate of failure and the often the public loathing of “working class celebrity” (Skeggs and Wood 2011: 2–3).

MasterChef Australia shows more subtlety than a simply denigrating of working-class participants. Important in its representation of class is the way in which *MCA* portrays the day-to-day operation of the restaurant industry. The excesses of restaurant chefs have been well-discussed (for example, Meloury and Signal 2014 discusses aggression as a presumed chef behaviour) and exploited, probably with exaggeration, in sensational memoirs such as Anthony Bourdain’s (Bourdain 2007). The rise of the chef as celebrity has also been discussed in research (Hyman 2008; Abbots 2015). The persona of the hard-bitten, uncompromising, foul-mouthed (including, in Bourdain’s case, hard-drinking and drug-taking) chef has been played upon, especially in food RTV. The personae of chefs such as Gordon Ramsay and Marco Pierre White and their successes as celebrity chefs have ridden on the back of this popularly held image.¹⁵

In the world of *MCA*, social class is centrally involved, in that actors such as George Calombaris engage actively as socio-political agents connecting to the external world. The judges carry with them into the world of *MCA* their external social identities — these form their eligibility and justification for their position within the on-screen world, but, in reverse, these external identities also establish them as exemplars for a general category of authority figures outside RTV. For example, George Calombaris’ criticism of Fair Work’s maintenance of penalty rates for hospitality workers (AAP 2012)¹⁶ established him within both

¹⁵ White’s protégé, Ramsay, has been notorious for bad behaviour and language in such RTV programs as *Ramsay’s Kitchen Nightmares* (2004–07), and its spin-offs in 2009 and 2014, and *Hell’s Kitchen* (2004). White took over as head chef in *Hell’s Kitchen* in 2007 and 2009, and began an on-going association with *MCA* in 2011. As has been already noted, he has been referred to within the program as the “godfather of modern cooking” (Season 4, E53W09–5; and Season 8, E06W02–1).

¹⁶ This criticism was made in the face of Australian Bureau of Statistics data showing that wage growth had fallen throughout 2012 (and, incidentally, has continued to fall since); see ABS (2013). Restaurant viability has also faced a variety of problems: under-capitalisation, lack of business acumen, falling margins, increased competition, etc (Dennis (2012).

the world of *MCA* and the socio-political world as a voice and public figure for hospitality employers when industrial matters arise. The class issues involved in Calombaris' public stance were made clearer by his call for the abolition of penalty rates, because they made operating on weekends and public holidays "unprofitable" (AAP 2012), coinciding with the expansion of his restaurant enterprises with the new Mama Baba restaurant opening (Colman 2012). More recently, Calombaris' restaurants have been identified as having underpaid penalty payments to staff for some time — an embarrassment that has drawn an apology for "historically poor processes" (Calligeros 2017). This so-called "blunder" stands in dangerous support of his outspoken opposition to the payment of penalty rates. Reinforcing the traditional view of chefs as aggressive and confrontational was also Calombaris' charge of assault at a football game in 2017, while representing the Melbourne Victory club as number one ticket holder (ABC 2017).¹⁷ Calombaris' statement after being found guilty in court, "At the end of the day I'm just a cook" (Dias 2017), may have been fittingly humble in the circumstances, but serves to emphasise that his public persona is far from that. Being "just a cook" is never sufficient qualification for being the number one ticket holder of a nationally competing football club. But this off-screen trouble seems not to have had any significant effect on his standing within the hospitality or television industries.¹⁸

The class structure within *MCA* is relatively simple. By definition, according to the rules of the competition, there is a ruling elite and, for the want of a better term, a proletariat.¹⁹ The ruling elite comprises judges and guests who either carry social and cultural capital within the television industry — celebrity status — or social and cultural capital within the hospitality industry. The proletariat comprises the contestants — a cohort that is, by definition, seeking class mobility from the ordinary (even though they are not ordinary) to the celebrity, and/or from the amateur to the professional. The former transition is shown to be possible, with previously successful contestants returning to the program as a

¹⁷ At the time of writing Calombaris was awaiting sentence pending a pre-sentence report, having had the court refuse a request for an imposition of public service (Dias 2017).

¹⁸ Calombaris has been confirmed as continuing his role in *MCA* for 2018 (Knox 2017b).

¹⁹ One could also postulate a conspiratorial 'deep state' within the world of *MCA* — an unseen, unheard and unspoken over-arching authority that would comprise the producers, editors and technical apparatus of the production of the finished program.

lower order of guest, but the latter transition is not made within the program. For example, a former contestant may be invited to present an exemplar dish, or to act as a mentoring judge, but has never been invited to cook as a professional chef in an Immunity Challenge.

In this thesis, *class* is approached as a metaphor rather than a direct referent to the socio-economic structure proposed and developed by seminal theorists such as Karl Marx (Marx 1887). The metaphor encompasses a synthesis of Weber's idea (albeit undeveloped) of *Stände* (Weber 2010). This broadening of 'class' to encompass attributes and structures outside the economic have been taken up by both Foucault and Bourdieu — Foucault, by the focus on social forms and locations of class activity (Bidet 2016: 212–213); and Bourdieu, by the synthesis of 'class' with the concept of positioning within social space and the ebb and flow of the accumulation and loss of symbolic and cultural, as well as economic, capital (Crossley 2008). Here, a synthesis of Foucault's and Bourdieu's views becomes useful in that the 'reading' is of the *screen* world, not the broader social and economic world. Even so, it will be useful to remember and refer to the clear connections between these two worlds — especially as the screen world of *MCA* is designed as, and strongly purports to be, a metonym of an identifiable part of the outside world.

Class is social stratification that is dictated by broad social definitions embedded through extended historical social practice. These definitions are based on a complex of economic, historical and social traditions and culminations. For both Marx and Weber, these classes are fixed and perpetuated by economic practices (Marx 1887; Weber 2010). Importantly, this stratification is extremely resilient and resistant to change. Barriers to mobility between classes are such things as wealth, convention, and the ability to dictate the terms of the translation of labour into capital. This translation of labour reflects the Marxist concept of "embedded labour" whereby control of the means of production dictates the terms under which labour is economically embedded into the materials of capital. For Marx, capital exists in purely economic terms (Marx 1887), but Weber moves further to consider social stratification: "The genuine home of 'classes' is within the 'economic order', and the genuine home of the *Stände* is within the 'social order' " (Weber 2010: 148). By this, Weber establishes the difference, and useful

distinction, between social stratification that is the product of economic and, especially, market forces and processes — that is, *class* — and stratification that is the product of historical associations, usually through birth and education, that is, *Stände* (Waters and Waters 2010).²⁰ This form of social stratification is also maintained by what Pierre Bourdieu came to establish as social capital (Bourdieu 1986b).

In extending the possible manifestation of capital into the social sphere, Bourdieu conflates Weber's classes and *Stände*. For Bourdieu, capital need not be economic. Although he emphasises the importance of economic capital, class is also something that can be socially constructed — as can cultural, political, and social capital — through the activity of operating within social fields (Bourdieu 1986b). However, the accumulation of capital in any form does not guarantee, and may not even contribute to, class mobility. For example, winning a RTV contest that carries a prize may contribute nothing to the possibility of rising within social classes. Just as a TattsLotto winner may remain a member of a lower social class in the view of members of an exclusive men's club, so too a *MCA* contestant who wins a temporary advantage in a preliminary activity remains merely a contestant. In *MCA*, temporary privileges may be granted through a minor success, but this is not even a rise in hierarchical authority let alone class. In both TattsLotto and *MCA*, the winner can be considered to have some material advantages available that other contestants do not have, but they do not have access to permanent or extended social and economic privileges. Their advantages remain solely within the realm of the economic market to the extent of their material wealth but do not necessarily extend to social or cultural advantage, such as influence within inner party politics or exclusive social clubs. These remain the province of those of superior class. Such material gains are advantages only within the competition of their own class — a class that has little influence over the regulation and rules by which class mobility may occur

²⁰ A contemporary example of differences in *Stände* operating can be drawn within the complex of law suits between Amber Harrison and the Seven West Media in Australia in 2017 over her relationship with Seven West Media CEO Tim Woner. Presiding judge Justice John Sackar was revealed to be an acquaintance of Seven West Media legal director Bruce McWilliam, and both were very close past associates of Prime Minister Malcolm Turnbull. Without suggesting complicity or wrongdoing, these associations are as notable as Amber Harrison's lack of such associations (Mayne 2017).

— but have little effect in competing with those who possess the deeper and more enduring privileges of superior class. Competition between classes is not merely a comparison of capital, it is a matter only of revolution because of the underlying history of “the illusory community” — State and Law (Marx 1968: 4). This is extremely difficult in societal terms and, of course, impossible within the world of a RTV game show. It is a fundamental political challenge that, in Bourdieuan terms, would be regarded as a zero-sum game, in which any advantage by one class is taken from advantages of the other. For example, *MCA* contestants are never granted such privileges that raise them to being comparable in power and authority to a judge. They are granted temporary privileges which give a supposed advantage over their colleagues, but do not allow changes to the fundamental rules that regulate the competition. A contestant may be granted the advantage of choosing the basic ingredient for cooking in the next challenge, or be allowed additional time over their rivals, but they are never given access to changing, for example, the method or criteria for judging. This would be a matter of political power— political power that enables fundamental social control — but as a subordinate class, contestants are granted only some privileges of material resources that can never question or challenge the underlying “illusory community”, the rules of the game.

By the time of Weber’s writing (about 1915) conflict between classes had shifted from previously being conflict between *Stände*, this shift being based on struggles arising from within the commodity and labour markets (Weber 2010: 141).

However, from a Bourdieuan perspective, I argue that since Weber’s time this conflict has again shifted back to being within *Stände*, under the heavy influence of consumerism. As consumer goods have become freely available (mainly on the back of cheap labour in the Developing World), and as Western employment (that is, consumption of labour) has shifted heavily towards service and away from manufacturing, labour–capital exchange has become increasingly symbolic and aspirations of mobility have shifted to the realm of *Stände* — the pursuit of social and economy advantage based on “a specific positive ... assessment of honor” (p. 142). Also, the underlying nature of class distinctions have been camouflaged by the availability of luxury goods in Western culture — material possessions have created a social and physical veneer of success for the working class,

deflecting identification of fundamental conflict between labour and economic capital. Social practices, such as being able to eat in restaurants, have also been instrumental in this camouflage. Changes in eating habits in Australia are often discussed — *The Cook and the Chef* (ABC TV 2006–09), for example, delighted in this theme.²¹

In Bourdieu’s view, social stratification involves two dimensions: that of “objectivity”, by which divisions of class are defined, measured and elucidated by the measurement of physical properties; and that of “subjectivity”, by which such divisions are established and drawn out by representations that social agents make of “reality” (Bourdieu 2013: 293). The distinction between these two approaches can be regarded as very superficial as the economic activities and, especially, the ‘market place’, in which exchanges of goods and labour take place, are an aggregation of social practices. That is, the economic market place is, in Roland Barthes’ terms, strictly *historical*, not *natural* (Barthes 1957b), and as such has become a mythic object, reified to an extent that it is regarded as a natural object, to be measured, manipulated and sustained, especially by governments.²²

Skeggs and Wood point out that Weber’s conception of class, and of *Stände*, moves away from Marx in casting off exploitation and struggle as foundations of class divisions in favour of “life chances” when talking about classes as such (Skeggs and Wood 2011: 138). However, any social activity that aims, even indirectly, towards class mobility must be seen as the pursuit of social (including economic and material) advantage. Acquiring advantage does not necessarily, as Wright would have it, involve causing disadvantage to another (Wright 2005). That is, social mobility is not necessarily part of a zero-sum game. In some cases of Marxist economic conflict, where the payment of labour is in direct opposition to profit — any remuneration for labour is directly and proportionally subtractive from profit for the owner of the means of production — it can be argued that there *is* competition for finite resources, and all advantage directly produces a

²¹ See, for example, Season 4 Episodes 2, 13, 20, and 31.

²² This is particularly noticeable in the discourse of business and economic reporting in which the ‘market’ will have ‘moved’, or ‘dropped’, by the action of shareholders buying and selling. In this, the social activity is extracted from the market itself — the activity of the social agents is expressed as causing changes in the external object: the reified ‘market’.

corresponding disadvantage. In many other cases, though, especially when Weber's *Stände* and Bourdieu's social-based capital are taken into account, capital is not a finite resource. Advantage is *relative* to other holdings of capital, not *subtractive* from a finite resource.

Advantage and disadvantage in the self-consciously constructed world of *MCA* are clearly drawn from finite resources. For example, by the rules governing the competition, advantages are available to be won in any particular part of the contest by one contestant at a time—in fact, the overall contest is conceived as such that there can be only one winner. In this example, there is only finite advantage possible — non-winning contestants remain as they were. Conversely, elimination contests offer finite disadvantage. That is, one contestant will accrue a fatal disadvantage, while the other (usually two) contestants — the non-losers — return to the main competition in the same position as they previously occupied, the same as the other current contestants. They suffer no lasting disadvantage. My contention is that, in this way, *MCA* presents a simplistic model of social and economic mobility, with the circumstances of the potential rise and fall condensed into a single self-contained conflict. Outside these finite possibilities is the ancillary accumulation of social and cultural capital through being involved in *MCA* and having a visible presence within it. This is more noticeable for contestants who prevail for sometime within the competition. For example, the runner-up of Season 1, Poh Ling Yeow, developed a more successful food media career than the season's winner, Julie Goodwin. Arguably, this was through Poh's natural presentation skills and appearance conforming better to the preconceptions of television producers. The ancillary social and cultural capital Poh attracted through her involvement in *MCA* served to introduce her to television and celebrity, but her personal attributes carried her into a food media career.

The Nature of Reality Television

Reality television (RTV) and, more specifically, its sub-genre food reality TV has been viewed, defined and analysed from a number of perspectives since the terms began to be regularly used in the 1990s. RTV has consistently defied definition. Annette Hill quotes early attempts to characterise the genre by Richard Kilborn as a “catch-all phrase” that incorporates observation and “fictional drama rooted

in real-life situations”, as well as cinema vérité styles of narrative construction, and even simulations of real-life characters and situations being subjected to documentary techniques (Kilborn 1994 in Hill 2005: 47). But such a loose collection of characteristics has the problem of allowing so broad a variety of programs that a ‘definition’ cannot be used effectively. As has been mentioned previously, Bondebjerg (2002) proposed a tighter set of criteria and three sub-forms: docu-soap, reality magazine, and reality show (pp. 171–172).

More broadly, RTV has been discussed within the context of a variety of on-screen genres that relate to the social world external to that of television production. Many of the attempts to characterise the genre have ended with RTV being indistinguishable from documentary, *cinema vérité* or other distinct genres. Bignell (2005) refers to a documentary heritage, connecting with the work of British seminal documentary film-maker John Grierson, and *cinema vérité* filmmakers, such as Richard Leacock, Robert Drew, Don Pennebaker and Frederick Wiseman. However, the ‘reality’ of even these documentary traditions becomes questionable as one looks at the methods by which it has attempted to ameliorate the tedium and repetition of waiting for events suitable for inclusion in a film or television program. This is illustrated clearly in the myths built by wildlife documentary makers — from the Disney team’s mass murder of lemmings in *White Wilderness* (1958) to David Attenborough’s ‘wildlife’ sequences shot in a zoo (see Palmer 2010 for many examples).

Biressi and Nunn (2005) move to a general, albeit vague, definition of RTV that simply holds “in common an emphasis on the representation of ordinary people and allegedly unscripted or spontaneous moments that supposedly reveal unmediated reality” (p. 10–11). The use of the terms ‘emphasis’, ‘allegedly’, ‘supposedly’ here emphasises the problems most scholars have experienced in categorising RTV and highlight its chameleon-like nature.

Leigh Edwards proposes that the hybridisation of the genre, as well as its dramatic emotional approach, contribute strongly to RTV’s success (Edwards 2013: 47–48). In general terms, the genre hybridisation uses documentary claims to truth and combines this with conventions from familiar fictional narrative structures. Observational documentary usually presents individuals and

situations as metonyms for broader social issues and circumstances. For example, many of John Pillinger's documentary films have examined particular circumstances but have been the setting for broad political statements and effects. On the other hand, fictional genres offer familiar conventions for emotional involvement and identification. Sitcoms offer consistent character development, and to this, soap operas add extended narratives (Edwards 2013: 50–51). But even these fictional genres have been hybridised, with series like *Doc Martin*, *Upper Middle Bogan*, *Please Like Me* and *Kath & Kim* all incorporating at least a sense of continuing narrative across a number of series, with the consequences of previous episodes remaining as elements of the sitcom's setting for subsequent episodes and seasons.²³

Unlike sitcom and soap operas in which representing an external (social) reality is merely assumed, RTV overtly makes a claim to represent at least a part of an everyday reality that viewers would recognise. So 'reality' for producers and viewers of RTV remains a complex manifestation of cognitive dissonance. Through interviewing producers and participants, Mast (2016) found a resistance to a naive sense of reality, but nevertheless a strong investment in authenticity and faith in the constructed world of RTV. Allen and Mendick (2013) had previously found that teenage viewers exhibited a similar resistance to the reality of RTV shows but nevertheless reworked their knowledge of RTV to invest in their own narratives of authenticity and the real. Earlier, Hill (2005) had found a selection of viewers had a quite general idea of the way in which RTV may relate to the everyday world around them. Interviewees used such terms as "documentaries of real life", "fly-on-the-wall stuff" and "cameras following people around" (p. 51). But within these terms people seemed to maintain a sliding scale of reality for programs, regarding, for example, UK programs such as *Children's Hospital* being more 'real' than *Big Brother* (pp. 53–54).

²³ I take as the distinguishing feature between sitcom and soap opera the way in which sitcom deals with situations that have no consequences in future episodes, for example, classic sit coms such as *The Dick Van Dyke Show* (CBS 1961–66), whereas soap opera uses particular situations as active elements to drive the narrative (for example, a wedding between main characters). Predominant in contemporary television is the hybrid (for example, *Doc Martin* may deal with a once-off health issue in an episode, but also develops ongoing romantic and business relationships).

In a novel approach to the problems of defining or characterising RTV, Lorenzo Dus and Blitvitch (2013) propose that it exists as a particular discourse rather than as a genre or format — that it is the manner in which material is presented and talked about rather than having any structural or format conventions. However, returning to Edwards' discussion of the hybridisation of genres, RTV uses a plethora of documentary techniques that, solely on that basis would make it indistinguishable from documentary as such. She lists many ways in which RTV commandeers documentary modes of address (Edwards 2013: 55–56), all of which are used by, for example, *MasterChef Australia*: voice-over narration, direct and indirect address by participants, both spontaneous and staged, and 'talking head' monologues.²⁴ RTV also uses conventions established by *cinéma vérité* and also used in current affairs, for example, tracking action and individuals with handheld cameras and rapid cutting.

The Australian Communications and Media Authority, in its report on reality television, regarded RTV as programming that generally encompassed a number of formal characteristics:

- an emphasis on factual unscripted content, the use of real people (and not professional actors);
- the portrayal of unscripted interactions between (ordinary) people;
- a competitive or 'game show' element, in which participants compete with one another;
- situations or environments controlled by the producers, which, at one extreme, may be highly contrived or manipulated;
- the editing of 'live' footage to enhance or create story lines.

(Australian Communications and Media Authority 2007: 26).

However, the report subsequently undermines most of these characteristics. It discusses at length the ways in which the 'real' people who participate are, in fact, carefully selected for attributes that will contribute to the entertainment values of the program (p. 34). Even though there is such an emphasis on participants being 'real' and as a result 'ordinary' (as opposed to 'celebrity' or 'expert'), programs such as *Survivor* make no secret of the special character of the players — television promos for the 2017 Australian season feature

²⁴ These techniques have also been incorporated into TV programs, such as *The Office* and *Parks and Gardens*, that are presented as drama but attach to themselves a heightened sense of 'truth' and 'reality' because of their use of elements of documentary discourse.

contestants explaining their special personal characteristics in an attempt to heighten viewers' anticipation of dramatic conflict.

Reality television, then, appears to sit as a chameleon-like hybrid genre, metamorphosing according to the opportunities for engaging audiences. Even some news reporting, and certainly popular current affairs, can be regarded as RTV. In these cases, news events can be catalysed or created by the efforts of news reporters or producers, situations which arguably can be regarded as indistinguishable from the creation of a professional kitchen or stranding 'ordinary' people on an otherwise deserted island.

Theoretical Perspectives on Reality Television

A variety of perspectives have been adopted for the study, analysis and critique of RTV, especially over the past 10 years. An abiding interest has been shown in Michel Foucault's concept of *governmentality* (Burchell, Gordon and Miller 1991). Before Foucault, Roland Barthes used the term in *Mythologies* (Barthes 1957c), referring to the process by which a government is perceived to be the creator or author of social relations rather than an effect of them; that is, government becomes mythologised as a natural entity rather than a social construction. Research into RTV has commonly used Foucault's idea of governmentality as "the close link between forms of power and processes of subjectification" (Lemke 2002; also Ouellette and Hay 2008). Less overtly, much RTV research has been grounded in this approach, from identifying and shaming underclasses (Eriksson 2015), to the politics of food television (Phillipov 2016), commodification (Reid 2015), and positive civic influences (Ouellette 2010). For this study, governmentality stands as a strong theoretical thread but within the context of revisiting and reframing Barthes' semiology (Barthes 1957; Barthes 1977) and recent adaptations of his work on myth (Bennett and McDougall 2013; Smith 2012). Also interesting in this context is the concept of *reification* that has its origins in Marxism (Lukács 1971), semiology (Barthes 1957c) and social theory (Berger and Luckmann 1966), in which "a relation between people takes on the character of a thing and thus acquires a 'phantom objectivity', an autonomy that seems so strictly rational and embracing as to conceal every trace of its fundamental nature: the relation between people" (Lukács 1971). Further to this is the work of Pierre Bourdieu in developing broad social views of class and

identity (Bourdieu 1986a; Bourdieu 2013). Bourdieu's theories have been widely used in the social analysis of food and culinary practices, especially his extension of the Marx's concept of capital into the social and symbolic arenas (for example, see Johnston and Baumann 2014; also LeBesco and Naccarato 2008). But what also must be reconciled is the extension of Marx by both Foucault and Bourdieu — Foucault in the development of concepts such as governmentality and discipline and strategies of power and class structures (Bidet 2016); and Bourdieu in his extension of the terms and ideas of capital (Desan 2013). Revisiting Marx (Marx 1887; Marx 1933) and recent commentators (for example Harvey 2010; Best 2014) also will contribute to synthesising a theoretical approach grounded strongly in Marxist thought and contemporary interpretations.

Identity and 'Makeover' in Reality Television

While presenting a broad historical overview of makeover television, Lewis (2008) implies 'makeover' can be regarded from at least two perspectives: first, in which the program attempts to impart some lifestyle skills or sensibilities to the audience; or, second, in which examples of changes of lifestyle attributes or specific skills are demonstrated and role models presented to the audience.

Within the first of these perspectives lies the broad collection of 'educative' lifestyle television. This includes a wide range of topics, some being multi-faceted, such as *Better Homes and Gardens* (Seven Network 1996–present), some specific to a lifestyle activity, for example, *Gardening Australia* (ABC 1990–present), and others having broader cultural education in mind while still demonstrating skills, for example, *Luke Nguyen's Vietnam* (SBS 2010). A landscape for food television of this perspective has been sketched by (Strange 1998) and is outlined in the following section.

A major departure from this was the second of these perspectives, with personal makeover now being demonstrated on-screen. Rather than skills being demonstrated for the viewer to emulate, makeover became a personal process by which the identity of the viewer can be managed or transformed within their now enhanced capabilities (Lewis 2008; Stagi 2013; Stagi 2014). Identity redefinition

has been a common theme in reality television, especially in its game-show manifestations. Rather than placing identity on show, as did the seminal US show *Real People* (NBC 1979–84), RTV has evolved into makeover formats that have changed the emphasis from identity revelation to identity re-evaluation and reconstruction, in some instances emphasising the transformation of existing identities, for example, *The Biggest Loser* (2004– present in various franchises) (see Holland, Blood, and Thomas 2015 and Yoo 2013).

The creation and/or transformation of social identity has been studied from a number of perspectives. Price (2010) and Turner (2005) take a view at the level of cultural identity. Price examines the myths of Australian nationalism and identity in the program *Bondi Rescue*, and Turner elucidates connections between national identity and soap opera and the way in which these connections are appropriated by RTV programs such as *Big Brother* and *Survivor*. Skeggs (2009) proposed “person production”, whereby RTV offers a “visible barometer of a person’s moral value” (p. 626) and lower-class participants are offered up for transformation or ridicule. Lewis (2011) looks at food RTV as a mode of expression, rather than of construction, with the class and ethnicity of participants being proponents of neoliberal personal transformation and Australian values. Another perspective on makeover is the aspirations of the ‘amateur’ or ordinary person and their transition to ‘professional’, that is, the acquisition of both social capital and future economic capital via personal transformation within the RTV world. Seale (2012) presents, for example, *MasterChef Australia*’s central narrative as “transforming amateur cooks into professionals”. This is regardless of whether successful *MCA* contestants are actually enabled to enter professional chef employment. Searle points particularly to the negative reactions to *MCA* by professional chefs (p. 32). It appears that winners of *MCA* (and, indeed, non-winners) have not attracted a great deal of attention from the restaurant industry — the professional social field in which *MCA* constantly extols the eminence of judges Mehigan and Calombaris. Even the Ten Network’s web page *Where Are They Now?* which displays the post-*MCA* careers of past winners and contestants (news.com.au 2015) includes only four of the seven previous winners. Two are established media food presenters (Julie Goodwin, Season 1; Adam Liaw, Season 2), one who

has been involved in media promotion for *MasterChef Australia* in India (Brent Owens, Season 6), and only one has worked professionally in the restaurant industry (Andy Allen, Season 4). The quality of life of contestants after leaving *MCA*, one way or another, has been seriously questioned despite the production company's insistence on that it provides good post-production pastoral care. Some participants (not necessarily the winners) have found food careers, but some have found the cloistered existence of the *MCA* world to be alienating when they have returned to their former lives (Begley 2014).

Reality television, and *MCA*, have shown a distinct ability to create celebrity also for chefs. This has been discussed for the cases of Marco Pierre White, Nigella Lawson (Hewer and Brownlie 2009; Magee 2007; Pratten 2003) and Jamie Oliver (Gunders and others 2011; Hollows 2003; Smith 2012), but the issues raised can also be used to examine the identities of the *MCA* judges and its guest judges.

Identity and authenticity, a strong emphasis in the *MCA* narrative, have also been considered. Turner (2005) and Rose and Wood (2005) take a cultural view in their discussions of the construction of national character in soap opera and RTV. Allen and Mendick (2013) consider young people's ambivalent attitudes to constructed ordinariness and authenticity. Arias, Haddrick, and Arnold (2003) examine the creation of social realities for screen by producers and writers. Aslama (2006) takes a view of individual realities, discussing and analysing self-disclosure as a fundamental of RTV.

Class and Reality Television

As previously mentioned, Skeggs and Wood (2011) consider "all [media] representations to be at some level always about class" and further, that this is particularly the case for television and its stories of 'ordinary' people. However, despite Marxist class analysis being regarded as "a living tradition in Australian scholarship" (Barnes and Cahill 2012), reality television seems to have not been perceived as a suitable subject for analysis.

Johnston and Baumann (2014) approach class and media depiction of food and 'foodism' at a macro level, exposing especially the romanticisation of poverty — that is, the ignoring of social class in providing access to the luxury of food choices or the social space to leisurely consider finer aspects of cuisine. For these

authors, the three aspects of this romanticisation are the transformation of poverty into a culinary style, the implicit denial of the existence of poverty, and the adoption of wealth and leisure as a prevailing social condition. These broad views will be taken up shortly in relation to RTV, food RTV and *MCA*.

Research into the depiction of social class within RTV has taken substantially an approach that focuses on attributes of participants and the way they are portrayed within the narrative of the 'reality'. Eriksson (2015) examines the display of class as a method of degrading and devaluing working-class attributes and values, making them a source of amusement. Hill (2015) analyses the legitimisation of neoliberal values by subjecting 'lower-class' participants to lie detectors, paternity tests, and the like, as a means by which lower social classes can be degraded and devalued. Such stunts in programs with reflections of 'reality' are not uncommon. In the case of *The Jeremy Kyle Show*, which Hill uses as the main text for study, the use of a lie-detector ensures at least one of the participants will be shamed as an adulterer, a liar or a maker of false accusations (p. 570).

The display of self and identity on RTV and in the context of social class has been extensively discussed, especially by Beverley Skeggs (Skeggs 2009; Skeggs and Wood 2011) who has focused on the over-representation of lower-class participants in RTV and the near-impossible tasks of transformation they have been faced with. Lewis (2011) has also presented representations of ethnicity and class on RTV as reflections of a cosmopolitan and middle-class culture as well as paths to neoliberal self-fulfilment. However little attention has been paid to the projection and/or reflection of social class and its assumed values in, for example, a Barthesian analysis of myth, although some attempts have been made in pursuing this in elucidating myths of cultural and national identity (Price 2010), food TV celebrity (Smith 2012) and media artefacts more broadly (Bennett and McDougall 2013). In this project, attention is to be focused much more directly on the construction of images of class within the manufactured reality of the TV series *MasterChef Australia*.

Tools for Analysis

The impetus for this study was twofold. The first was, to use Roland Barthes' words, "a feeling of impatience with the 'naturalness'" (Barthes 1957c: XI) that is widely invoked to justify a reality that is predominantly historical, that is, socially constructed and interpreted. The second was a dissatisfaction with the level of ideological criticism conducted on Australian reality television, and especially the conventional wisdom of the highly popular and commercially successful *MasterChef Australia*. It seemed that the program was, even from a superficial glance, far more ideologically complex than it had been so far adjudged. So this study incorporates a textual reading and analysis of Season 8 (2016) of *MasterChef Australia*, considering it not only a discrete program but also as a part of the continuing narrative and discourse of *MCA* since its introduction in 2009. Season 8 was chosen as it was current at the beginning of this project; it was also appropriate as a mature version of *MCA* — long past the initial enormous popularity and having surviving subsequent drops in ratings, and now occupying a position of solid performance that its production company and broadcast network seem to confidently rely upon.

The observations here have been made and quoted from exemplary sequences in *MCA* Season 8. That is, such observations could be made and analysed with equal validity when considering any of a large number of pieces of the text. The choice of textual sequences and elements was based on their representation of common elements of the whole season and its episodes. Thus, observations and analytical comments on the manner of dress of *MCA* judge Matt Preston, for example, could be made from almost any episode of the season. The evidence displayed by the text, especially in this case, was relentlessly consistent. Predominantly evidence came to attention by a combination of visual clues and supporting verbal behaviour. Indeed, observations made of verbal or visual phenomena in the course of this study often either contain or are catalysed by the other. For example, the symbolic violence of George Calombaris' tough-love counselling is often reinforced by a combination of non-verbal and spatial cues.

Having watched all of the episodes of the *MCA* season, noting and commenting on actions, settings and interconnections between them, and interconnections between episodes, I then repeated the viewing, but this time dwelling upon

exemplars of connections and patterns of the representation of power, authority and inequality.

In identifying the power structures and class characteristics of *MCA*, I have adopted in a flexible way Pierre Bourdieu's assertion that any scientific classification must take into consideration two properties: "material properties", which can be more or less quantified; and "symbolic properties", which can be perceived and evaluated "according to their specific logic" (Bourdieu 2013: 293). Historically, the characterisation of class by the first property is exemplified by Marx (1887) and the second by Weber, in his distinction between *class* and *Stände* (Weber 2010).

The emphasis here is on symbolic properties, and the pursuit of "specific logic" (Bourdieu 1986a: 1), that is the logic by which symbolic properties are derived and elucidated from observation. The number of times, for example, that the phrase "you may be going home" is used in an episode of *MCA* may be of some interest, but that can be strongly outweighed and its significance transformed by the way in which the phrase is vocalised and the context in which it is used. (Could it be interpreted as a threat? Was it a regretful aside? Was it a simple expression of the consequence of a judging sequence?)

Also of interest is Bourdieu's notion of dual strategies for class mobility: on one hand, attempting to identify and be identified with groups reputed to be superior, and on the other hand, to be distinguished from groups that are reputed or identified as being inferior (Bourdieu 2013: 295). In *MCA*, we are presented with contestants who are following the first of these strategies, and judges and guest chefs who are following the second. As with such attempts at class mobility in the wider world, the impulse of the contestants' strategy is resisted by the impulse of that of the judges. And these social classes exist twice, as Bourdieu would have it, first objectively — they control the materials of the *MCA* world as well as interpret and arbitrate on the "rules" — and second, in the "contrasted classifications and representations produced by agents on the basis of a practical knowledge of these distributions such as they are expressed in lifestyles" (Bourdieu 2013: 296).

For Barthes, the term *politics* extends beyond institutionalised social organisation, to encompass social interaction at all levels. In addition, “speech” includes structured patterns of signs (Barthes 1957b). Thus “politicised speech” is essentially a structured pattern of signs whose meaning(s) are understood as a consequence of conscious negotiation and agreement between a particular group. In contrast, “depoliticised speech” is speech that has been severed from its political, human-based existence (both in origin and use) and serves as an incontestable natural phenomenon. That is, human expression is withdrawn from the province of human activity — in Barthes’ terms, *history* — and transformed into an existence independent of human creation, naturalised to the extent of being perceived, and accepted, as a phenomenon of *nature*. From its place within the natural — as opposed to historical — world, depoliticised speech no longer depends on negotiation for its signification and meaning; signifier and signified cannot be separated, their existence as a single entity is immutable and incontestable. Such depoliticised speech can be bound into social narratives that form myths — concepts that are integrated into an indivisible unit of signification and meaning that is taken as having existence outside human construction and influence. So, if accepted as such, myth cannot be contested any more than whether it is raining outdoors.

Peter Berger and Thomas L. Luckmann took up what was an essentially Barthesian position in their use of reification as a process by which parts of the social world as “objectified” (Berger and Luckmann 1966). They brought forward the term from Karl Marx and Georg Lukács to refer to “the apprehension of the products of human activity as if they were something other than human products — such as facts of nature, results of cosmic laws, or manifestations of divine will” (p. 106). However, both Marx and Lukács saw reification purely as the creation of a “phantom objectivity” of labour, that is, the alienation of human labour from the commodities it produces (Marx 1887; Lukács 1971). For Barthes, and for Berger and Luckmann, reification is applied as a more general social phenomenon — for Barthes, in human expression; and for Berger and Luckmann, in social relations.

Also important in this analytical context are *metaphor* and *metonymy*. The first may be familiar as a literary device but semiotically is conceived far more

broadly: “the locus of metaphor is not in language at all, but in the way we conceptualize one mental domain in terms of another” (Lakoff 1993: 203) — an external entity is presented so as to characterise another, inflicting the second with characteristics of the first. For example, within the text at hand, *MCA* judge Matt Preston’s clothes become a metaphor for his culinary sensibility — taste, distinction and aesthetic flair in both clothing fashion and culinary refinement are metaphorically brought together to become one. Metonymy, and more specifically, *synecdoche*,²⁵ is a representation in which a closely associated attribute or a select part of an entity is presented so as to substitute for the whole, imbuing the whole with characteristics of the attribute or part. In the case of *MCA*, the behaviour of the judges is projected as being not just typical, but standing for, the behaviour of all professional chefs. Their performance is presented, not as a personal or idiosyncratic expression, but as that expected of the others of their profession and class.

For this study, four key Bourdieuan “contrasted classifications and representations” (Bourdieu 2013: 296) — food ingredients, cuisine and culinary technique, personal appearance and the representation of persona, and the use of space — are presented as metonyms and metaphors within the context of the situation and narrative of *MCA*. In the reading of Season 8 (2016), these emblems are considered as demonstrations supporting existing structures of social class, the exercise and legitimisation of authority, and socio-cultural practices in the hospitality industry. The *MCA* Season 8 was examined closely, episode-by-episode, first as broadcast, and subsequently from video recordings and/or web-based video streams. This episode-by-episode reading was conducted with regard to the individual emblems of significance outlined, a complete viewing of the season concentrating on each of these in turn. Continuing threads and issues were traced as they became apparent and as issues arose, so reference was made back through previous seasons and their individual episodes, identifying historical similarities, continuities and differences.

²⁵ The technical distinction between metonym and synecdoche is that the former refers to the representation by a *closely associated attribute*, whereas the latter refers using a part of the whole (see (Lakoff and Johnson 2003: 29–33). Thus, “Table four is ready to order” is metonymic but not a synecdoche; “The leading hand will organise the work gang” is a synecdoche. Here the term *metonym* is used for simplicity.

When referring to individual episodes, unless otherwise noted the reference is to *MCA* Season 8 (2016). An abbreviated episode title is used in the following manner:

E*W*-*

In this abbreviation:

E* denotes the episode in the program's overall sequence;

W* denotes the week in which the episode occurred; and

-* denotes the day of the week on which the episode was broadcast.

This last is important as specific activities usually took place on specific days of the week:

Day 1 (Sunday): Mystery Box Challenge in which the winner gained an advantage (usually being able to choose specific ingredients) for the following Invention Test. The best three of the Invention Test move to Tuesday's (Day 3) Immunity Challenge and the worst three must seek to avoid elimination in the following Monday night's (Day 2) Pressure Test.

Day 2 (Monday): Pressure Test, in which the worst three performing contestants on the Sunday's Invention Test cook to avoid elimination. The worst performer is eliminated from the competition.

Day 3 (Tuesday): Immunity Challenge, in which the three best performing contestants on the Sunday's Invention Test cook, the winner challenging a guest chef. If the contestant wins, they are granted an Immunity Pin which can be surrendered in a future round in order to avoid cooking in an elimination Pressure Test.

Day 4 (Wednesday): Team Challenge, in which contestants are allocated into teams that are required to perform team tasks, usually a multi-course service of many diners — usually as *à la carte* or 'walk up' service.

Day 5 (Thursday): Elimination Challenge and Test, in which three members of the losing team from the previous night are selected (by a quiz or test) to cook to

avoid elimination, the worst performer being “sent home”. This is sometimes following by a Masterclass presented by a guest chef and some of the judges.

This weekly order was sometimes changed, for example, Week 9 (episodes 41–45) was devoted to four ‘pop-up’ service challenges and an Elimination Challenge. As the season progressed this schedule was contracted to more rapidly eliminate contestants (for example, week 12).

Reading *MasterChef Australia*

This thesis argues that *MasterChef Australia* engages clearly with class and social distinction in concept, design and performance — class structure within its constructed world is overt and clearly delineated. It is set, by the parameters of the program (and its internal world), that there exists a class of judges whose skills, authority and culinary frame of reference are absolute and incontestable. They are joined on occasions by guests who are equally omnipotent. In contrast, the contestants make up the equivalent of a petite bourgeoisie (Marx and Engels 1888: 247). Contestants are acknowledged to have significant skills that set them apart from the ordinary people of the wider world's working class (the proletariat?) — they are referred to as “Australia's best amateur cooks”. But the members of this privileged group have, within the *MCA* world, freedom of action (that is, to make decisions within a relatively restricted scope) but have no power or authority over others or over the operation of the competition itself. There are privileges that are granted to successful contestants in minor challenges. For example, in E06W02–1, Charlie, having produced the best dish in Marco Pierre White's Mystery Box Challenge, was granted the privilege of choosing the protein and vegetable ingredients for the subsequent Invention Test. These privileges are always referred to by the *MCA* judges as ‘advantages’ and are talked of as being of huge significance. However, the advantage is usually quite minor. In this example, Charlie gained no actual advantage, being judged as neither special nor poor in the Invention Test.

In this simple class structure the members of the ruling class are clearly identified. From the opening of the first season of *MCA*, judges Calombaris, Mehigan and Preston have been presented as part of an elite within the hospitality industry in Australia. In Season 1, E01W01–1 viewers were told in the introductory voice over that the program featured some of “the country's most famous chefs” and the judges were described as being “three of the most formidable names in the culinary world”.

Perhaps in recognition that their names were less than formidable in the world of television, the judges introduced themselves:

I'm George Calombaris. Last year I was voted chef of the year in *The Age Good Food Guide*. After all my years in the kitchen I can spot a pretender a mile away.

At the age of just 31, Calombaris' "all my years" represented only between five and seven years as a professional chef. Regardless of his rapid rise to fame within the hospitality industry in Australia, the appeal to any form of seniority approaches hyperbole. Being able to "spot a pretender a mile away" announces Calombaris as hard-bitten, street-wise and astute — he has "seen it all" (albeit in less than seven years). He is shown in a professional kitchen wearing his chef's 'whites' — a chef ready for action.

I'm Gary Mehigan. I own two restaurants and I've got over 70 staff ... I've seen hundreds of wannabe chefs come and go ... Most don't survive.

In keeping with *MCA*'s prevailing theme of 'food journeys' and life-changing experience for contestants, Mehigan's final statement is not qualified as survival in the restaurant industry. To fail as a chef is total failure. As an early cue to his *MCA* persona, Mehigan's introduction is intercut with scenes of him in his restaurant, front of house, and teaching young chefs in a professional kitchen. This links to his claim of having many employees — he is a manager, a mentor and a teacher, who genuinely cares for those who aspire to rise above their station.

I'm Matt Preston. Last year I was voted the world's best food journalist. What I'm looking for in Australia's first MasterChef is someone who has knowledge of food, a great palate, fantastic technique and some real substance to what their culinary dream is.

Apart from the hyperbole of extending a Journalist of the Year Award (albeit granted by Le Cordon Bleu) to "the world's best food journalist", from the outset Preston demands attributes of amateur cooks that he would be hard-pressed to find in professional chefs. He is flamboyantly dressed: a three-piece suit and brightly coloured shirt worn with a cravat, hair relatively long (in comparison to the other two judges) and self-consciously styled. He is presented, in an also eighteenth-century manner, as a man of distinction, discernment and taste, demanding uncompromisingly high standards and expectations. The effect is accentuated by his 'cultured' British accent.

Other chefs and guests to feature in *MCA* have often not been famous in television viewing and have had to have celebrity built by the program; that is, it has been necessary to build social capital that will have currency outside the relatively closed circle of the hospitality industry. This is achieved by hyperbole

in introductions by the ‘master chefs’ of *MCA* and by repeated appearances. This construction of a broad celebrity profile has been necessary to maintain the integrity of the program’s elite. Once established, this celebrity is built upon by the food industry more broadly. For example, in the space of a few years Shannon Bennett has risen in public recognition through his association with *MCA*. He is now a household face not only as a chef but also in advertising food and kitchen wares and as a major restaurant entrepreneur (Grundy 2016).

The ‘petite bourgeoisie’ of *MCA* conform to Lewis’ description of the attempt to represent a classless cross-section of ‘ordinary’ Australians (Lewis 2011: 107–110). The selection of contestants seems to have been carefully controlled by gender — roughly equal numbers of male and female contestants are promoted to the ‘top 24’. However, the choice of contestants is heavily biased towards younger age groups. A rough survey of the contestants who feature in Seasons 1 to 8 of *MCA* is presented in Table 1.

Age group (years)	Percentage of featured contestants	Percentage surviving until the final four
18–27	48%	44%
28–37	35%	41%
38–47	13%	9%
48–57	3%	0%
57+	1%	0%

Table 1: Age groups of *MCA* contestants

For contestants surviving until the final four, there is a slight increase in representation of the 28–37-year age group, with corresponding falls for 18–27 and 38–47, but more broadly no contestant over the age of 41 has survived to the final four in the first eight seasons of *MCA*. In the representation of age groups, *MCA* does not feature ordinary Australians, but a highly selective proportion of them.

Prevailing messages of the ‘ordinariness’ of the contestants are made by the way they are identified in on-screen superimposed titles when contestants make personal statements. These titles commonly label the contestant as being of a

certain age and of a particular occupation — the professional label they have carried before entering the *MCA* world.

1: Managers (e.g. human resources manager, company director, construction project manager)	24	12.8%
2: Professionals (e.g. doctor, lawyer, teacher, engineer)	52	27.8%
3: Technicians and associate professionals (e.g. hairdresser, IT systems consultant, graphic designer)	34	18.2%
4: Clerical support workers (e.g. office assistant, receptionist, data manager)	6	3.2%
5: Service and sales workers (e.g. child care worker, retail workers, bar tender, waitress)	15	8.0%
6: Skilled agricultural, forestry and fishery workers	0	0.0%
7: Craft and related trades workers (e.g. builder, carpenter, electrician)	7	3.7%
8: Plant and machine operators, and assemblers (e.g. fork lift driver, heavy machinery operator, CNC machinist)	4	2.1%
9: Elementary occupations (e.g. stockman, call centre worker)	4	2.1%
0: Armed forces occupations (e.g. navy submariner)	1	0.5%
B: Business owner (e.g. fishmonger, cinema proprietor, bar owner)	7	3.7%
S: Student (rarely differentiated, but sometimes as “PhD student”, “Masters student”)	24	12.8%
P: Parent (e.g. mother, stay-at-home-mum, stay-at-home-dad)	9	4.8%
?: Unemployed ²⁶	1	0.5%
	187	

Table 2: Occupation groupings of *MCA* contestants

The pseudo-documentary style of these statements serves to reinforce a sense of reality, not only about what the contestant reveals of their thinking at the time, but also about themselves as a person. In keeping with incongruity as a basic tenet of RTV, their revelations about the way they feel, justifications of what they may do or may have done are set against their role in *MCA* and their

²⁶ This was Daniel Aulsebrook in Season 2, who was labeled as “Recently made redundant”.

fantasies of who they may be and what they may be doing if they win the competition.

Table 2 shows the contestants over *MCA*'s eight seasons grouped by professed occupation,²⁷ using the International Labour Organisation's International Standard Classification of Occupations (ILO 2004). As with age groups, the occupational labelling of contestants shows them to be less than 'ordinary'. One in eight contestants are labelled as having managerial occupations within the ILO's ISCO definitions. Many occupations cited in *MCA* use the term "manager", but in a number of cases obviously do not fall within ISCO definitions. For example, "data manager" falls obviously within the ISCO clerical rather than managerial classifications. This euphemistic flattery of occupation title serves to reinforce the social sacrifice that contestants are purported to have made in order to pursue their culinary aspirations by entering the competition. Notable is that more than 45% of contestants are identified as being from professional, associate professional or technical occupations.

After even a cursory analysis we can see that *MCA* contestants are not ordinary — they are predominantly young and professional. And given that 83% of the featured contestants are under the age of 38, *MCA* has been a part of their television viewing, and hence socialisation, for seven years. For some, these seven years would have covered at least a substantial part of their teenage years, a time when future jobs and career are strongly being considered. For others, these years would embrace a period in which career change becomes a strong issue.²⁸ As a result, the cohort of contestants for *MCA* in 2016 is selected from a RTV-savvy population that would be very clear about the rules, conventions and expectations of the program. This in itself is a strongly normative influence, creating a cohort of contestants who could possibly have trained themselves for some time to perform 'professionally' within the on-screen world of *MCA*. Such training involves not only culinary expertise, but also culinary and creative style, so the judges covertly exercise their already-acquired social capital and exert

²⁷ Examples of occupations listed within the ILO's classifications are taken from occupations used as identifiers with *MCA*.

²⁸ Average job tenure for under-25s is less than 2 years, while that for the 25–35 age group is less than 3 years (see McCrindle 2014; Wilkins 2015).

their established authority even before competitors enter the *MCA* world. This is knowledge that contestants have prepared themselves in *MCA*'s practices and expectations is overtly expressed during the first audition of Season 9 in 2017.

Despite the voice-over introduction at the beginning of the first episode:

(Voice Over): They come from all over Australia ... ordinary people ... determined to change their lives ...

and Gary Mehigan's claim in his opening *spiel*:

Mehigan: ... You are here because you are the best home cooks in the country. Not professionals, home cooks.

The first likely contestant to be auditioned, Michelle makes clear the less than ordinary background to the auditions:

Michelle: I hope this dish will show the judges all the technique I've learned, and taught myself ... All the techniques I've learned, I just practice over and over, until I get it right ...

Further performances in the auditions confirm that Michelle's approach is a common one.

Food Dreams

The basic premise of the program, repeatedly announced and discussed, is to grant an eventual winner the realisation of their 'food dream'. In the context of social class, these 'dreams' are a metaphor of social mobility and the competition represents a path to rising above the social position that is presented of the contestants' outside life. This rise is presented as being so significant and worthwhile that it stands as a life-changing experience regardless of whether the contestants are dentists, lawyers or sales assistants.

The 'dreams' that contestants predominantly profess to be pursuing, however, are rarely (if ever) ones that challenge the social position of the judges.

Contestants dream almost entirely of small-scale 'artisan' businesses that they describe in terms of either escape from their 'ordinary' lives or engaging in a creative existence that they are denied by their current employment or life situation. But these dreams remain romantic constructions in which the contestants rarely address the difficulties, hard work and risks associated with starting a small business, especially in the food industry. The aspirations of the contestants almost invariably are visions of a neoliberal ideal — being free of 'constraints' of current situations, able to take control of one's destiny and to be

able to fully express oneself through independent work, in this case working with food.

Contestant Matt, in Season 8, speaks of his food dream as a proprietor of a gourmet food truck. It is a 'dream' that aspires to take command of a component of Marxist class that is rarely mentioned in discussions of class and RTV — the means of production. For Matt, his dream takes him from the implied powerlessness of his job as a coffee roaster to an independent food professional — a free agent produced through the neoliberal transformation of winning *MCA*. The narrative of Matt's food dream is the pursuit of self-actualisation through class mobility. Other dreams include being a proprietor of a dessert bar (a common theme), opening a restaurant with their children (the dream of Brett, an airline pilot), operating a gourmet food outlet from a farm, and many other variations of independently run, small-scale food enterprises. However, it is uncommon for a contestant to aspire to be a professional chef, even though occasionally a contestant is offered an apprenticeship or work experience by one of the judges or guests. Food dreams characteristically are not so grandiose as to aspire actually to enter the professional world of judges Gary and George — executive professional chefs running their own *haute cuisine* restaurants — or, for that matter, the world of judge Matt Preston who is a professional food critic and writer. The dreams are characteristically ideas of small-scale free enterprises — establishing a family-run café or restaurant or running a dessert bar, being a hotel proprietor with a fine-dining bistro or establishing a fine-dining food truck.

Seasons of *MCA* have included a publishing contract as a prize, for books and/or magazine columns, but when talking of their food dreams during the show contestants do not express any aspirations to writing or publishing as a goal. Nor do they speak of aspirations to pursue television careers. Despite this, a number of contestants have eventually pursued food journalism and cookbook writing, and some have found their way into television food presentation.

How the realisation of any of these food dreams offers any real social mobility for the contestants remains vague. These goals are couched in terms of neoliberal self-actualisation — individuals having the opportunity to allow their inner

talents and creativity to be expressed; having freedom from perceived constraints of previous careers or social circumstances; taking personal responsibility over their lives. Issues that could be seen as central to class mobility — wealth, social influence, control over the fundamental means of maintaining one's position — are never taken into consideration. These food dreams are characteristically very strongly connected to contemporary left-wing neoliberalism, engaging with petit-bourgeois post-counter culture ideas of the independent social life²⁹ — a popular cultural syndrome centred on a middle-class searching for authenticity through agrarian produce, specialist food and diet, and appropriation of elements Eastern philosophy (for example, yoga, massage).³⁰ Vander Schee and Kline (2013) characterise neoliberalism as “an unequivocal commitment to the quasi-deification of the free market that aims to replace public mechanisms for responding to social concerns with completely privatized ones” (p. 565) and Harvey (2005) considers that “the assumption that individual freedoms are guaranteed by freedom of the market and of trade is a cardinal feature of neoliberal thinking” (p. 7). These assumptions, of the inherent guarantee of individual freedoms through market freedom, are characteristic in a large majority of the dreams of *MCA* participants.

The implicit denial of class that characterises the on-screen relationships and narratives is maintained by a number of *MCA* conventions and strategies. The collegial atmosphere and supportive behaviour of contestants has been remarked upon as one of the successful differences in the Australian version of *MasterChef* from overseas versions (Haarman 2015: 162; Bednarek 2013: 91). This enables the contestants to interact for the cameras as companions on a “journey” (as the judges often put it). It also is reinforced by the judges adopting the role of mentors and advisors, while also contributing a ‘hay-seed’ version of lay counselling when contestants experience emotional ‘melt-downs’ and (as happens regularly) dissolve into tears. The frequency of tears, hugging, high-five slapping and cheering each other on, all add to the egalitarian veneer of what, in essence,

²⁹ Streeter (1999) discusses the neoliberal context of ‘alternative’ computer culture, raising issues which I contend are equally valid to be raised in considering ‘alternative’ lifestyle and culture.

³⁰ Despite the rising popularity of food choices such as vegetarianism, veganism, lactose-free (not necessarily the choice only of the lactose intolerant), gluten-free (not necessarily the choice only of the coeliac) and ‘paleo’ diet, *MCA* has never introduced or allowed excursions into these restricted ‘cuisines’.

is a contrived television competition that serves to reward only one of many contestants with prizes that make very little contribution to any true class mobility, either socially or professionally. Contestants often experience a temporary rise in social standing via the celebrity of the media exposure *MCA* gives them, usually as eliminated contestants in network cross-promotions.³¹ This is despite judges regularly urging competitors with reminders that “this could change your life” and contestants expressing their commitment to the competition as essential in their pursuit of life-changing opportunities. As previously mentioned, Lewis (2011) explores some aspects of class embedded in *MCA*, especially the myth of classlessness within Australian culture, and noting the contradictions between this and “the bourgeois connotations of the culinary and fine-dining culture promoted on the show” (p. 108). But the denial of class is not casual and incidental within the program. It is systematic within a number of aspects of the on-screen presentation of *MCA*.

Johnston and Baumann (2014) outline three frames for maintaining a veneer of classlessness: the romanticisation of poverty; the presentation of poverty as no worse than wealth; and the presentation of extreme wealth and privilege as socially normal (pp. 157–169). Although their examples are exclusively drawn from print media, their frames remain pertinent in considering other media. In the case of *MCA*, it is the third of these frames that is most used to draw the audience’s attention away from the issue of class, while maintaining strong images of power and structures of class within the reality and narrative of the program itself. Poverty, as such, is never mentioned or referred to. The nearest venture is to comment on ‘ordinary’ cooking or ‘street food’³² and such novelty scenarios as cooking with ‘leftovers’ (which is discussed below).

MasterChef Australia’s portrayal of wealth and privilege as a normal social condition is overt from the outset of the program. There is never any question as to whether viewers may not be able to afford to engage in cooking as a ‘master

³¹ These are appearances on other programs within the same network that serve as promotions for *MCA* in the guise of ‘soft’ news or human-interest stories. The Ten Network has achieved this often via *The Project*, a news and current affairs program aimed at younger viewers (18–35) scheduled immediately before *MCA* itself. Judges and eliminated contestants were often interviewed in the final segment of *The Project*, so screening immediately before *MCA* itself.

³² Any mention of, or engagement with street food, is never associated with poverty but is a romanticised appropriation and stylisation of elements of ‘peasant cooking’.

chef. The world of *MCA* is the world of cooking and dining with distinction and superior class. There are four main vehicles examined here, by which this is advanced: ingredients, in type, quality and quantity; the dominant cuisine, including the techniques and tastes covertly demanded by the judges and overtly pursued by the contestants; personal appearance and behaviour; and the spatial arrangement and setting in which the action takes place. These have been chosen for study as emblems of power and authority as the first two are strong cultural elements of culinary practice and tradition, historically established. The third and fourth encompass a broad amalgam of non-verbal communication signals that are easily manipulated within the creation of an on-screen 'world', and are also well-established markers of status and authority.

Ingredients

The ingredients of food have a long history of symbolising social hierarchy. Laudan (2013) discusses the hierarchy of both ingredients and cooking techniques that greatly socially influenced the ancient world. To be human was to eat in the manner of humans, and to eat appropriately to one's status was regarded as essential to maintaining that status: "Since rank and cuisine were believed to be causally connected, it followed that eating the cuisine of a person of lower rank or of animals would turn the diner into a lesser person, or even a beast" (p. 44). This connection between rank (or class) and cuisine was very real in European society. Despite the dearth of serious comment on the diet and eating traditions of the poor in Renaissance Italy, Capatti and Montanari (1999) emphasise the ingredients deemed appropriate for the poor working class. Potato bread being "hard to digest" was, as a consequence, regarded as most appropriate peasant food (p. 282). They also make the point that it is most likely that "the culinary model attributed by intellectuals to the peasant population corresponds more to the force of circumstances than to choices freely made" (p. 282).

And it remains in the modern world that the ingredients we accept as appropriate to our kitchens are those we hold as appropriate to our position within society. Just as a Renaissance Italian peasant would regard beef as not

only poor for their constitution³³ but also a significant treat for only a special occasion, so too the modern working family would be unlikely to include caviar or lobster on the weekly shopping list.

The ingredients used in the majority of *MCA* tests and challenges are not those to be expected in the average Australian kitchen. Even the briefest visit to any of the outlets of one of *MCA*'s major sponsors, Coles supermarkets, shows that there are many ingredients that *MCA* contestants are invited, or instructed, to use that do not grace the shelves or delicatessen where the average home cook may shop (this despite the sponsor's oft-used slogan, "Shop where a MasterChef shops"). Roland Barthes' assertion that "...[t]here is perhaps no natural item of food that signifies anything in itself, except for a few deluxe items such as salmon, caviar, truffles, and so on, whose preparation is less important than their absolute cost" (Barthes 1979: 169) applies to many of the ingredients used in *MCA* — for example, rib eye beef, crab, lobster. The signification is of wealth, luxury and refined taste.

Curiously ignored by *MCA* is the increasingly popular interest in the source and production of ingredients — the "local" and organic food movements. Johnston and Baumann (2014) regard these as being prime motivators in 'foodie' culture, locally grown food having reached "near common-sense status" (p. 124) and organic sourcing being "now a mainstream element of the gourmet foodscape" (p. 129). And, of course, in its techniques and final dishes, *MCA* undoubtedly sees itself as clearly inhabiting the gourmet foodscape. However, no mention is made of these 'political' aspects of ingredient sourcing. In E06W02–1, when Charlie exercises a choice of ingredient as an advantage won in a challenge, we are shown the possible ingredients in opulent quantity with no mention of aspects which may make them desirable. It is left until the next advertisement break, 11 minutes later, for the program's major sponsor to mention such a recommendation as "no-hormone-added beef".³⁴ *MCA* does give concession to the

³³ Capatti and Montanari (1999) paraphrase the Savoy court physician Giacomo Albini as professing that "the rich should abstain from heavy soups, such as those based on legumes or organ meats, which might require a complicated digestive process. The poor should avoid refined food, as their coarse stomachs would have difficulty assimilating it" (p. 283).

³⁴ This refers to the Southern Tasmanian broadcast of *MCA* in WIN-TV, although the advertisement is likely to be used throughout the broadcasting network across all states.

‘organic’ and ‘fresh’ with its garden — an area outside the main kitchen stage building which is arranged as a garden of herbs and edible flowers. For cooking challenges, the garden is either made available or not as a source of ingredients. But these labels, ‘organic’ and ‘fresh’, are consistently undermined by the *MCA* judges’ obsession with *haute cuisine* and technique — after an ingredient has been frozen with liquid nitrogen or subsumed as a component of savoury ice cream, its freshness can be regarded as somewhat compromised. Technique is valued over freshness and origin. These being assumed by the fact that the ‘pantry’ is stocked by the program’s major sponsor, playing upon myths that the sponsor has built through its advertising: that all of its goods are of the highest quality and from highly ethical sourcing. As has been outlined by Phillipov (2016), this assumption is established and strengthened by the sponsor’s advertising strategies both within the program, for example, product placement and activities involving one or more of the sponsor’s supposed suppliers, and in advertising external to the world of *MCA* but contiguous as conventionally inserted advertising (incidentally, frequently featuring a celebrity chef who was prominent in early seasons of *MCA*).

MasterChef Australia’s auditions during the first week of Season 8 were realised with relatively few extraordinary ingredients, although we were treated to some dishes based on the unusual (for example, water buffalo); but, despite the supermarket sponsor’s catch-cry, such ingredients as kingfish (fresh enough to prepare sashimi), duck, and whole salmon must be regarded as rarer than “everyday” (E01W01–1).

In E21W05–1 the Mystery Box Challenge was based on “left-overs”. To introduce such a term is politically charged. To establish an implied hierarchy of palatability or preference in which one of the defining classes is ‘left-overs’, by extension creates other classes: one of ‘quality’, one of ‘preferred’ and, perhaps, another of ‘unpalatable’. ‘Left-overs’ carries with it the taint of having already been used or having been discarded as excess or inferior. The ‘quality’ ingredients have been taken in preference. The term ‘leftovers’ also has a powerful class connotation. These are the ingredients of the poor, those who cannot afford to discard anything that can be possibly be used or reused. Such an impulse is not that of Bourdieu’s people of distinction (Bourdieu 1986a) but that of those who

are unable, through social position or necessity — that is, relative poverty — to develop and exercise discernment and distinction. In *MCA*, to be forced to cook with ‘leftovers’ may be aimed at reproducing the professional chef’s concern for economy, but in this *MCA* activity, this is not explicitly expressed. To do so would be to expose a professional motivator that runs counter to the veneer of luxury and taste, two attributes that are prioritised in fine dining and ‘superior’ culinary practice. But in this *MCA* challenge, the misfortune of the poor and the undiscerning is appropriated to avoid exposing the parsimony that drives even the highest peaks of professional cooking. Cooking with ‘leftovers’ becomes a challenging exercise, paying lip-service to economising perhaps in a similar way to politicians and CEOs spending a night sleeping in a park as a way of being seen to empathise with the homeless (Tapim 2013). The symbolism of such voluntary deprivations is undermined by the fact that, unlike those suffering the social experience of being truly homeless (in this case), the participants have a defined duration for the experience, they have been well housed and fed before the experience and they know that in the event of any emergency they will be very quickly attended to by professional help. In the same way, *MCA* appropriates the parsimony of the poor.

But the leftovers *MCA* contestants were forced to cook with in E21W05–1 were a wide departure from those usually encountered in any home kitchen. The contestants were given a Mystery Box containing whole barramundi, pork belly, beetroot, miso, corn, coriander, vanilla beans and limes. They were asked to prepare an Invention Test dish for the judges. Subsequently, anything that the contestants didn’t use in the first Invention Test was announced by the judges as “leftovers”. The contestants reacted with trepidation, despite many of them having pristine pork belly, barramundi, and other ingredients in their leftovers. Contestant Matt even further denigrates his leftovers as ingredients:

MATT (Contestant): We’re cooking with our scraps! ...

Further:

MATT PRESTON: Today you’re going to get extra credit for using anything creatively that you would have normally thrown out from your cook here today.

This is declared despite the fact that none of the unused ingredients would be discarded from any kitchen, commercial or home — barramundi would keep

refrigerated, as would pork belly; the remaining ingredients would have a shelf or refrigerator life of at least a couple of days.

Then:

GEORGE: I think the leftovers in a weird way make it easier — as silly as that sounds — you should look at every single bit of ingredient that's given to you as an opportunity ... And that's what chefs are doing right now. Yeah? We're not going for those primary cuts that are, you know, you don't really need to do much ... We're looking deeper.

Is the claim that modern chefs are looking to economise by using leftover, cheap or unpopular ingredients? If so, this is undermined by the extensive use of expensive seafood and fine cuts of meat, both previously and subsequently, in *MCA*. By implication, this statement also espouses an emphasis on *technique* over *ingredient* in contemporary professional cooking — “... we're looking deeper ...” — a theme which is consistent throughout *MCA* (“... Have you done enough to stay in the competition?”) but that undermines the use of expensive and luxury ingredients.

The contestants all peruse the remaining ingredients in their mystery boxes:

GARY: It's all about your leftovers ...

Then we see some examples:

ELENA: I've got more than half the barramundi left and some of the coriander stems and leaves. It's just forcing us to be creative ... and I hope I can come up with something.

... and ...

HARRY: I've only got half a fillet of barra' left. I have to be really careful. I have to be super conservative ...

Further confusing the notion of leftovers:

HEATHER: I love cooking with leftovers. It's creative. You get your mind ticking, what's in the pantry (CUT TO HALF A BARRAMUNDI ON HEATHER'S BENCH), what's in the fridge ...

And from George Calombaris:

GEORGE: Waste not want not! ...

Contestant Matt has a whole barramundi to use, but muses:

MATT: I've got a few bits and pieces, scraps, a bit of beetroot, ah corrie (CUT TO A FULL BOWL OF FRESH CORIANDER), beetroot leaves. So, yeah, I'm going to put that creativity to the test today ...

Further:

MATT: Anything and everything that's not nailed down on this bench today is going in that stock. They want leftovers (CUT TO STOCK POT CONTAINING FISH CARCASS AND WHOLE LIME), they're getting everything ...

... a little later ...

THERESA (TO GEORGE): I've got a miso, like, a funky miso ice cream, coriander crumb with caramelised corn for that sweetness and crunch to go with the salty ice cream and then (LOOKS UP AT CLOCK) whatever time permits, I'll see if I can keep going with my leftovers ...

... and again ...

GARY: ... I think they must have had an inkling because it was all about thrift and economy this morning ...

Just as leftovers are defined in terms of 'restaurant' cooking as 'ingredients that are unused in cooking' (rather than a more home cooking definition of 'food left-over after dining') the notion of "thrift and economy" has now been defined, with connotations of wealth and luxury, as 'not discarding anything that has not been used in cooking'. Central here is the difference between ingredients unused in *cooking* and food unused in *dining*.

From the original box of ingredients surely one would usually be able to comfortably prepare probably more than one meal for a family of four. Here, under the guise of thrift and economy, the contestants prepare two dishes. The demonstration here is that superior culinary practice and excess are strongly related. Just as superior culinary practice was shown to involve engaging with exclusive ingredients, so now it is shown to also engage with excess. Both require wealth that enables superior access to food resources that, in turn, can be used in the pursuit of luxury and superior social capital.

MasterChef Australia also played upon the novelty of cooking with 'economical' ingredients in Season 3 (Episode 28) with a Tinned and Frozen Challenge. The challenge was to face the implied hardship of the ordinary cook by using ingredients that it was assumed were the choice of the undiscerning and those of little distinction. The pointed introduction of canned and frozen goods carried with it the heavy implication that such a choice would never be made by discerning cooks, and certainly never be made by a chef in a professional kitchen. Despite the fact that the judges maintained that the flavour of such ingredients could be used to advantage (according to discerning tastes), the use of canned

and frozen ingredients was emphasised as a hardship by contestants, who expressed wonder that quality food could be prepared from such inferior ingredients.

SUN: The one really surprising thing for me, in the pantry, is that nobody's burst into tears, because I feel like it's ... a horror story ...

And further:

DANIELLE: My heart has sunk a little ...

And, again:

ALANA: ... It's all frozen and canned food. I'm thinking, "What on Earth am I going to make out of this stuff"?

So, through the difficulties that we witnessed contestants overcoming, the authority and superiority of the judges' usual evaluation of ingredients were again demonstrated when some contestants could not successfully overcome the challenge of using lower-class ingredients. But of those deemed most successful, four of the five best dishes were desserts prepared using frozen berries (one of the most common and most successful ingredients to survive freezing).

In a shift, these cheap and common forms of ingredients — canned and frozen — which are normally shunned by *MCA* and were denigrated in Season 3, were specified in Season 8 in Nigella Lawson's Three-course Dinner Pressure Test (E17W4–2): crab avocado salad, lamb with radishes and peas, and coffee panna cotta with chocolate coffee sauce, with the relatively simple nature of the dishes undermined by only 60 minutes being available for preparation, cooking and plating. In this test, contestants used frozen peas, and were at some effort to excuse the fact:

CHLOE (IN INTERVIEW): We're using frozen peas today and ... it's cool because I think you tell yourself you can't use frozen peas in the MasterChef kitchen but you do at home, and that's what this challenge is all about ... home cooking, stepped up a notch ...

CUT TO: NIGELLA LAWSON AND CHLOE AT WORKBENCH DURING CHALLENGE

NIGELLA: There's nothing wrong with frozen peas.

CHLOE: I love frozen peas.

In this challenge, canned crab is used for the only time in the season. But the crab itself is displayed only after it is well clear of the can and safely into a

mixing bowl. In this case, in contrast to Season 3's challenge, the can is never shown in any shot of the work benches. The crab's source is implicitly denied by a lack of reference to, or appearance of, the can. In its other appearances in the season crab is presented whole, dwelt upon as a raw ingredient and the cooking technique discussed. The elaborate technique of breaking down a crab is also closely shown in E51W11–1 and E61W13–1.

E36W08–1 was devoted to a Mystery Box challenges containing ingredients designated in Matt Preston's introduction as "ugly". Of the eight ingredients, three could be regarded as expensive (that is, outside the budget of an average household) — monkfish, morel mushrooms and Moreton Bay bugs. Five of the eight would be commonly regarded as obscure — the three expensive ingredients plus Buddha's hand and horned melon.³⁵ Only the remaining two ingredients would be freely available from a suburban supermarket at a reasonable cost — celeriac and blue cheese. Similarly, horned melon would be known only in tropical Australia but in 2015, in the Northern territory, was declared a host plant for the Cucumber Green Mottle Mosaic Virus (NT Government 2015). Given its climate requirements and the restrictions that have been placed on its cultivation, the African horned melon would be a rare vegetable, especially in the southern states of Australia.

Strangely, *MCA* does not enter the world of 'superfoods'. Year by year, some ingredients have been taken up by food celebrities and the media as the newest, most interesting or healthiest to eat.³⁶ Such fads are regularly debunked (see for example, Benedictus 2016) but continue unabated. However *MCA* has shown little interest in 'healthy' eating (Phillipov 2012) but remains resiliently focused on *haute*, rather than popular, cuisine.

MasterChef Australia does present its version of the most fashionable ingredients. In E56W12–1, the top six contestants are presented with a Mystery Box:

³⁵ Although on 19 June 2015, Fresh Plaza (2015) noted that Buddha's hand was being stocked by Coles "in selected Victorian stores for a limited time."

³⁶ See, for example, Australian Naturalcare (2017), the web page of an on-line 'health food' retailer, listing 15 ingredients it regards as "superfoods".

MATT: This box contains some of the hottest ingredients being used around the world, and right here in Australia, right now. Some of them you will be familiar with, and some of them will be a whole new world.

The box contains camel milk (from Kyabram, Matt is particular to mention); Peruvian pisco; matcha (green tea powder); gochujang (chilli bean paste); kohlrabi; cobia (black kingfish); Kaiserfleisch; and mushroom leaves. The choice here veers significantly from popular press ideas of ‘hottest’ ingredients. For example, in a brief article about the 2016 Sydney Taste Festival, of five Sydney chefs asked about the “hottest food trends”, two cited Australian native ingredients (native thyme, bush cucumbers and lemon myrtle), two cited “old-fashioned” trends (fried chicken, and preserved ingredients), and one “Arabic-style” (news.com.au 2016). None of these would seem to incorporate *MCA*’s hottest Mystery Box ingredients. The *MCA* Mystery Box represents distinction with all its connotations of class — superior knowledge, refined taste, worldly experience, and a casual disregard for cost.

In contrast, even a cursory look at a website pointedly aimed at the ‘home’ cook, such as taste.com.au (the recipe site for *MCA* sponsor Coles) shows the highest ratings from users as recipes such as “gluten-free *huevos rancheros* with beans”, “Tia Maria and sour cream dip with fresh fruit”, and “sausages and beans” (taste.com.au 2017). These use no ingredient more exotic than sour cream or Tia Maria liqueur. The first uses a title which integrates the popular health approach of reducing or excluding gluten from one’s diet with an appropriation of Spanish ethnic flavours by using the name for a similar (but not the same) dish familiar to traditional Spanish cuisine.³⁷ The title of this recipe also serves as an attempt to energise the dish as adventurous or ‘exotic’, despite the ingredients and cooking techniques denying this. The second recipe incorporates liqueur into a dessert — not a practice obscure in the average home kitchen, but a little unusual nevertheless. The third offers no surprises and may owe its popularity to being a reminder of the attractions of the familiar and/or mundane. Similarly, the first three recipes in the Popular/Chicken category of *MCA* Season 8 recipes incorporate no unusual ingredients — “Sweet chilli chicken thigh”, “Cola baked

³⁷ The use of the term “cuisine” is problematic, of course, in that it seeks to embody what can be a diverse range of culinary preferences and practices.

chicken”, and “Jude’s chicken Italienne”.³⁸ All three are attributed to Matt Preston, the restaurant critic and purveyor of ‘home cooking’ in the *MCA* Masterclass segments. The third of these recipes uses as an ingredient that has been derided in *MCA* itself, but also excused — canned tomato soup, which is not merely a canned ingredient, but a canned and prepared food. And, perhaps coincidentally, this same recipe also attempts an appropriation of an ‘exotic’ cuisine, this time French — the predominant food style of *MCA* — but referencing an Italian origin.

Less emphasis has been placed on Masterclasses — direct cooking demonstrations by *MCA* judges and guests — as *MCA* has developed. For example, Season 4 featured Masterclasses as complete episodes, shown on Friday nights and Season 5 featured a Masterclass every week, however Season 8 featured only four contained in an extension of Thursday episodes.³⁹ These are aimed at educating contestants in relatively basic techniques — firmly within Strange’s Cookery–Educative genre (Strange 1998) rather than within a reality–food–game show. In these Masterclasses, the judges and guest chefs demonstrate culinary techniques to the contestants, usually purporting to provide ‘tips and tricks’. The dishes featured in these demonstrations were, however, hardly fare for which *MCA* contestants would require instruction. In Season 8, the demonstrations included such dishes as baked cheesecake, roast chicken, chocolate mousse, and steak sandwich, all dishes that contestants would be likely to discount as being too simple or basic for preparing in the competition. Other Masterclass dishes were more complex, such as guest Javier Plascencia’s Baja fish tacos, or unlikely, such as George Calombaris’ oyster ice cream. But none demonstrated any extension of technique over that which the contestants had probably developed in preparing for audition. It would appear that these Masterclasses are a concession to the belief within *MCA* that viewers do not cook as a MasterChef might, but engage with culinary practices much more mundane and ordinary than those aspired to and demonstrated within the competition

³⁸ See MasterChef Recipe Search, using the search term “chicken”. Available at: <http://tenplay.com.au/channel-ten/masterchef/recipes/masterchef-search-results?q=Chicken&show=MasterChef&type=recipe>. Accessed: 23 August 2016.

³⁹ E10W02–5, E20W04–5, E45W09–5, and E55W11–5.

itself. The demonstrations are not, as is presented by the on-screen scenario, included for the benefit of contestants — they are clearly aimed at viewers, cloaked as instruction of culinary technique to contestants, but being demonstrations of power and authority. In this context, the contestants show suitable awe over Matt Preston's cheesecake or Marco Pierre White's arancini.

So, even the basic materials used in cooking, and by *MCA* contestants, are classified, that is, embedded with class values (Bourdieu 2013). Inequality is emphasised, not only in the ability to afford luxurious ingredients, but also in the knowledge and skills to use them in ways that embody distinction and taste, in Bourdieu's terms (Bourdieu 1986a). Even when everyday — 'ordinary', lower-class — ingredients are employed, only the *MCA* judges can recognise their potential and motivate the contestants to cook excellently using the mundane or mediocre.

Cuisine and Technique

A frequent question put to *MCA* contestants is, "Have you done enough to stay in the competition?" — the essence being that technique has a dimension, not only of *quality*, but also of *quantity* and cuisine has a dimension of *complexity*. This is borne out by judges' comments such as, "... there's loads of technique ...", a statement that heavily calls up the myth — Barthes' depoliticised speech (Barthes 1957b) — of *haute cuisine* technique embodying, and being the natural carrier of, culinary excellence, refinement and distinction. Related strongly to technique — even to be regarded as a technique in itself — is the presentation of the food: plating. Both the preparation and the presentation of the food in *MCA* represent the pursuit of symbolic capital in struggles for distinction — unique identification of groups of individuals within social space — that are fundamental to class (Bourdieu 1986a; Crossley 2008: 94).

The preparation and presentation of food throughout *MCA* follows profoundly *haute cuisine* aspiration, grown from the traditions of the ruling class and its use of banquets and feasts as expressions of power and authority. Food is regularly presented as appearing to be something other than a sum of the ingredients. *MCA* regular Heston Blumenthal has pursued a path, especially in his television shows *Heston's Feasts* (Optomen 2009–10) and *Heston's Fantastical Food* (Betty

TV and Snail Porridge 2012), of presenting food in form alien to those of the ingredients or original flavours. Attempts are made to hide or disguise elements of a dish in its presentation — inverting the order of ingredients, such as piling vegetables on top of meat, or secreting an ingredient inside another. This technique is encouraged and used often in the preparation and presentation of desserts during the *MCA* competition.

In pursuing and maintaining their power and authority over food and its preparation, the *MCA* judges actively support Blumenthal's pursuits by which culinary art mystifies the passage of ingredient to plate, and indeed, the passage of plate to diner. In *MCA*, Blumenthal has overseen the serving of, for example, sequences of dishes served in pods on the Melbourne Star (E41W09–1) and in a heritage-listed underground carpark at Melbourne University (E43W09–3), with the first of these having a theme of “outer space”.

The *MCA* judges regularly use terms such as “pretty” and “ugly” for the appearance and arrangement of the food on the plate, although maintaining a mantra of “it’s all about flavour”. For example, in E06W02–1 Matt Preston urges the contestants on with:

MATT PRESTON: ... Honesty, simplicity, flavour ... That is the recipe for success today.

We find later that despite a pronounced flaw — ice cream which has collapsed into a molten mess — that Cecilia's dessert has been chosen for tasting:

GARY: You seemed a little surprised that we called you.

CECILIA: Yeah.

GARY: You know, we picked it because it looks really pretty, and the promise of that caramel ice cream makes a delicious proposition.

MARCO PIERRE WHITE: It's sad that it melted ...

That is, Gary Mehigan justifies the dish on its appearance, but then excuses its failings in that regard by falling back on the promise of flavour, rather than using it as the primary criterion. Later in the same episode Cecilia (again) puts up a dish which is essentially a hollowed parsnip filled with meat.

GARY: What are we going to say about this? It certainly doesn't look appetising ...

The judges cut into and gingerly taste the dish:

MATT PRESTON: It, kind of, looks like a sculpture, not like a plate of food, and I think that's an important thing to understand.

The next dish tasted is extolled as “Yum” by George Calombaris and “the best eating dish of the day” by Marco Pierre White. No mention is made of the way it looks. Such contradictions in criteria for judgement are rife throughout the competition. And such contradictions serve to emphasise the discernment and distinction of the judges — only they can know when presentation outweighs flavour and vice versa. This shifting of criteria promotes the exclusion of the contestants (and the audience) from the class inhabited by the judges which knows, and demonstrates, distinction. If the contestants (or we, the viewers) begin to accurately predict the criteria by which the judges evaluate dishes of food, an alternative balance of criteria is introduced, setting them (and us) back to more strongly inhabit the class of the less discerning, less distinguished. This protects the symbolic capital that the judges may hold over the contestants and the viewers — the shifting ground of the criteria emphasising the regulatory authority that the judges hold over the formation of symbolic capital (Bourdieu 1986a). This manifestation of Bourdieu's symbolic capital, which “exists only in the relationship between distinct and distinctive properties” (Bourdieu, Pierre 2013: 297), is in this case, flavour, presentation and preparation. An added criterion is “cooking with love”, a sentimental narrative in food preparation. This is called upon frequently, especially in the judges' descriptions of what will be required of the contestants, and also in running commentaries about the performance of individuals. This is also emphasised in the back stories of individual contestants, who call upon sentiment in describing their ‘food dreams’, and in rationalising their choice of dish or technique, presenting certain food as conjuring memories of loved ones, earlier fond times and/or deceased relatives.

The judges are presented as individuals who are in Bourdieu's words “endowed with schemata of perception and appreciation that predispose them to recognize ... these properties, that is, to constitute them into expressive styles, transformed and unrecognizable forms of positions in relations of force” (Bourdieu 2013). Also present is a Barthian mythologising of the creative, the aesthete. The discernment of the *MCA* judges is unknowable and unattainable by the contestants (and viewers) — it exists in the realm that has traditionally been the

province of genius and sublime creativity. This myth holds that creativity is an attribute that cannot be understood or explained in terms of the ordinary world, for example, by work, study, trial and error or persistence. Genius and creativity are regarded as being ‘gifted’ by extra-human forces. So, by dint of contradictions, the *MCA* judges are elevated to a class unattainable by those participating in and watching the program.

The judges’ aesthetic of complexity in preparation and presentation also encourages contestants to pursue the ‘deconstruction’ of otherwise familiar dishes. George Calombaris’ Deconstructed Greek Salad, demonstrated to the contestants in Season 2 (2010) comprised preparations of red pepper terrine, cucumber ice cream, tomato jam, feta cream, green olive gel, basil marinated tomatoes, olive sponge, brioche and tomato jam sandwich, oregano vinaigrette and cucumber spaghetti, all arranged over a platter.⁴⁰ In this, Calombaris not only appropriates the term ‘Greek salad’ and transforms it into a term that refers to a dish far outside the knowledge and capability of contestants and viewers, but he also mythologises his right to do so, first as a member of the culinary ruling class, but also as a person of Greek ethnic background.

Complexity in preparing and assembling food is heightened in Pressure Tests, in which three contestants, who are in peril for previous failure, are required to prepare a copy of a dish prepared and presented by a guest chef. The homeliest dish of these in Season 8 was Nigella Lawson’s Three-course Dinner Pressure Test (E17W4–2) discussed earlier. More usual is the replication of an outlandishly complex (in home kitchen terms) dish that may require up to 70 steps in preparation, and that may have up to a dozen ‘elements’ to assemble in the final plating. The pressure is further accentuated by either restricting the time available (as with the Nigella Lawson dinner) or having the method require an extended time at the kitchen bench, transforming the exercise into a cooking marathon. In E57W12–2, Christie Tania’s *Mystique* required more than 60 cooking steps and four and a half hours to prepare — this for a recipe that the contestants (ostensibly) had never seen before the cooking began. Likewise, for Anna Polyviou’s *Mess* (E27W06–2)— a dessert that resembled a space satellite,

⁴⁰ The full recipe is available in print and on video at: <https://tenplay.com.au/channel-ten/masterchef/recipes/george-s-greek-salad>. Accessed 15 June 2017.

included “snap-crackle-pop” crumbled candy in a test tube and when served was dashed to pieces on the board — the recipe required 74 preparation steps and three hours for preparation and cooking, with an extra 15 minutes allocated for assembly and plating.

But it is not just long, complex recipes and preparations that elevate *MCA* cooking and food to *haute cuisine*, emphasising the Bourdieuan distinction and taste (Bourdieu 1986a) of the *MCA* experience and the judges who preside over it. The flagrant use of quantities of ingredients also contribute to a demonstration of a pursuit uncompromising ‘excellence’. In E59W12–4, Harry reduces a large lobster and a chicken to a plate of food that appears to be a reasonable single main course serving. And even then, the lobster bisque is criticised by the judges as lacking complexity and balance, and denigrated by being referred to as a “murky sauce” — a significant demotion from “bisque”.⁴¹

A significant feature of the elevation of *MCA* food and its preparation into culinary upper class is the persistent use, and reference to, specialised equipment and techniques. The emphasis changes from season to season of the program. In Season 8, contestants frequently turned to the culinary technique of smoking, a technique that had become popular in professional kitchens a little before the recording of the season started. Rather than being simply a barbeque technique, smoking has risen in popularity via the fad of ‘American’ cuisine (Richardson 2016). Contestants used a kitchen version using relatively unusual home kitchen items such as hickory chips, blow torches and smoke containers. They used the technique for a wide variety of ingredients and dishes: duck (Mimi in E4W01–4), trout (Gary Mehigan in Masterclass E24W04–5), dates (Anastasia in E37W08–2), corn puree (Brett in E46W10–1), parsnip puree (Brett in E48W10–3), goat cheese (Mimi in E59W12–4),⁴² chocolate parfait (Elise in E61W13–1), and vegetables (Elena in E63W13–3). Smoking was also one of the

⁴¹ This naming and renaming of food preparations to raise or lower their culinary worth is a consistent feature of the judges’ (and also the contestants’) *MCA* lexicon.

⁴² In this episode, Mimi actually smoked ricotta cheese, having mistaken it for goat’s cheese. But her intention was to use the technique on goat’s cheese. The judges were unanimous that smoking ricotta cheese was not a success.

techniques available to be chosen in a Mystery Box Challenge and Method Invention Test in the finals (E56W12–1).

Sous vide also has made regular appearances over the course of *MCA*. It is a technique by which food is cooked at a relatively low temperature in a water bath. The food is enclosed in a plastic pouch from which all air has been excluded (hence *sous vide*: “under vacuum”). The technique requires precision and, therefore, specialised equipment — including a temperature-controlled water bath, a vacuum sealer, plastic pouches, etc — all expensive and some bulky. Giving emphasis to *MCA*’s marketing power, many of these specialised items have now been produced in versions for consumers and now will be found in many home kitchens. However, they remain relatively expensive in comparison to traditional cookware, and require extra kitchen space for their storage and use. The heavy marketing ability of the program has been evident also in sales of ingredients (Phillipov 2016).

Other techniques have been borrowed from George Calombaris’ interest in molecular gastronomy, mentioned earlier. Contestants regularly transformed ingredients using liquid nitrogen, foaming and dry ice, while accepting as normal kitchen appliances such as blast chillers, ice cream churns and blowtorches. Pressure cookers, although humble are also used often and without comment (although in a not-so-humble electric model) regardless of being less than common in Australian kitchens, although not unusual in Europe.⁴³ The pressure cooker was employed as a time-saver rather than a method of uniquely modifying the texture and/or appearance of ingredients. The microwave was also used in exactly the same role, with its main role in Season 8 curiously being to cook sponge cakes.

Liquid nitrogen and dry ice were used often to introduction drama to the presentation and serving of food in *MCA*.⁴⁴ In Season 5 E48W10–4, contestants

⁴³ The pressure cooker seems to have been feared as an explosion danger in the USA until it became more highly technical in the 1970s. See Lacalamita (2012), Chapter 2, for an expression of this aversion; also, Powell (2009).

⁴⁴ When using liquid nitrogen or dry ice contestants wore safety equipment — face masks and heavy gloves — presumably dictated by occupational health and safety regulations, but nevertheless demonstrating the exotic and ‘scientific’ nature of the technique and heightening the drama of the preparation and presentation of dishes.

were asked to ‘Hestonise’ a dish, that is, to introduce into their presentation of food some of the ‘theatre’ for which celebrity chef Heston Blumenthal has become famous. Of the four contestants cooking in the Elimination Challenge, two chose to use dry ice to dramatise their food, while the remaining two used liquid nitrogen.

This emphasis on techniques outside the province of the ordinary kitchen was also illustrated in E56W12–1, when Harry’s reward for winning a Mystery Box challenge was to be able to choose a technique for the following Invention Test. Of smoking, sous-vide and liquid nitrogen, he chose liquid nitrogen, the least accessible to the home cook. Again, in E61W13–1, the finalists were given choices that included not only ingredients (such as bananas and pickles), but also utensils (for example, skewers, mortar and pestle) and techniques (for example, aeration, liquefying). So, despite the common catch-cry from the judges, “It’s all about flavour”, the food of *MCA* is also about ways of preparing food and the technology involved, both of which regularly exceed the possibilities and capabilities of less-than-professional kitchens and chefs. This concentration on technical processes is also demonstrated when the novelty introduced to the first round of an Immunity Challenge in Season 7 E38W08–3 was a restriction to using only utensils available in the contestants “grandmothers’ kitchens”:

MATT: No fancy \$2000 mixers or blast chillers, this is the stuff.

CUT TO: A BENCH LADEN WITH HAND BEATERS, MECHANICAL SCALES
AND ROLLING PINS.

CUT TO: CONTESTANT ROSE LOOKING FEARFUL ...

As the challenge begins we are shown contestants struggling with their ‘old’ implements, presenting the myth that modern gourmet cooking, and certainly cooking associated with superior social class, requires expensive technology. Further, the trepidation shown by the contestants underscores the notion that such simple implements can produce only simple — that is, inferior, or lower-class — results.

The cuisine of *MCA* is an enterprise of the ‘professional’ kitchen, and an enterprise of the professional — highly technical, highly specialised. It is the province of neither the ‘ordinary’ nor the ‘amateur’. It is demonstrated that it is

technically beyond both home cooks and even “the best amateur cooks in Australia” (the contestants) to work in such an environment. To do so is to display the incongruity of social agent misplaced in social space, an incongruity that reality television characteristically dwells upon.

Personal Presentation

Before considering appearance and clothing as emblems of power and authority, I consider it not insignificant that all three judges in the *MCA* contest are male. Despite female chefs being relatively rare in professional kitchens⁴⁵ and with the percentage falling over recent years, especially in the UK (Henderson 2017), *MCA* represents women well in its selection of contestants. In Season 8, approximately 50% of the contestants were female throughout the contest — for example, 13 of the final 24, three of the final six and two of the final four — a balance so consistent as to imply a strategy by the producers, perhaps to retain a strong impulse for female viewers to identify with contestants.⁴⁶ This balance is maintained for invited food celebrities (three of each gender) but fell to less than 25% for guest chefs (4 of a total of 17 were female). For the purposes of television presentation in general, it would appear that the producers of *MCA* are conscious of evenly representing gender. But the gender representation of professional cooking takes a more normative approach — the representation of professional cooking in *MCA* is a normative image of an industry in which power, authority and superior attributes are the province male chefs.

Traditions of demonstrating power and authority via clothes have a long history in Western culture. Rösener (1992: 85) notes that even well into the nineteenth-century clothing was “an unmistakable reflection of the social hierarchy” (p. 85). Differences in clothing have also been politically charged, especially during the French Revolution in which the rejection of a clothing convention — the wearing of breeches and stockings — became an emblem of revolution against the upper classes (Sonenscher 2008: 57–58). From a reverse political perspective, Henry VIII and Elizabeth I of England created and enhanced statutes that served to

⁴⁵ For example, only eight of the Australian Financial Review’s top 100 restaurants in 2016 had female lead chefs (Australian Financial Review 2016).

⁴⁶ This gender balance for competing contestants has been uncannily even. Over the first eight seasons of *MCA* there have been 84 female and 83 male contestants.

regulate costume in order not only to encourage the use of English textiles (especially wool over cotton), but also to maintain a strong day-to-day distinction between classes. Further, Louis XIV of France consciously manipulated court fashion in order to control the behaviour of his nobility, distracting them from building power bases to oppose the king (Burke 1992).

Systems of signification in *MasterChef Australia* tend to be simplistic — adhering to and perpetuating stereotypes of class and authority. In Season 8, in our first view of the judges as a team for the new season, all three judges wear suits,



Figure 1: *MCA* judges, Season 8, E01W01–1.

contemporary emblems of masculine success (Figure 1). But these are made distinctive by annotations, according to the character, personality and role that each of the wearers in to exhibit in the *MCA* narrative. Gary Mehigan’s suit is mid-grey and he wears a white business shirt with the collar unbuttoned. It is not the “power suit” of the 1990s (Owyong 2009: 202), but it is conservative and unassuming, as if he had been wearing a tie until only moments ago.⁴⁷ George Calombaris’ suit is a little more fashionable, also conservative — dark blue — but worn with a brightly contrasting coloured shirt, not necessarily a

⁴⁷ This can be commonly observed in groups of business men who have moved from a formal to casual setting — say, from a business meeting to drinks in a bar across the street. Many will remove their tie and open their shirt collar as a mark of the transition from competitive business to social camaraderie.

conservative business choice. Immediately there is established a distinction between the two — the one, quiet, conservative, conventional, signifying professionalism, competence and efficiency (Owyong 2009: 203); the other inhabiting the same professional social space, but more daring, more distinctive. The third judge, Matt Preston wears a purple check three-piece suit, white shirt, a black shiny (silk?) cravat with matching pocket square.⁴⁸ His attire is distinctly a twenty-first century interpretation of an eighteenth or nineteenth century dandy. The cut of the suit is contemporary, but the effect of his dress is anachronistic. His appearance links him strongly, albeit simplistically, to being a man of taste and distinction, a dandy, even if from past more opulent times. The persona projected by his dress also conjures up modern myths associated with ‘camp’ — the individual who by displaying affectation of dress and an over-emphasis on “propriety” and manners, seeks to be regarded as having a high degree of discernment and cultural sophistication (Barthes 1962). Matt Preston appropriates one of Eliza Glick’s models of dandyism (Glick 2001) based on Susan Sontag’s *Notes on Camp*, associating “homosexual aestheticism with the ‘unmistakably modern’” project of “seeing the world as an aesthetic phenomenon,” which is to say “in terms of artifice, of stylization” (p. 130). In *MCA*, Preston adopts a veneer of qualities of the nineteenth-century aesthete, rather than homosexuality — perhaps a mythic representation of Jean Anthelme Brillat-Savarin rather than the stereotypic homosexual aesthete who presides in *A Queer Eye for the Straight Guy* (Bravo 2003–2007).

Immediately in the series, the *MCA* judges embody the three sides of food, cooking and culinary art that *MCA* is about to portray — the solid, business-like foundations of modern culinary practice (Mehigan); a creative reaching beyond the conventional boundaries of those foundations (Calombaris); and the taste and refinement necessary for higher orders of culinary judgement (Preston).⁴⁹ They

⁴⁸ Curiously, the website Art of Manliness advises that when matching a pocket square to a tie (or cravat), to “avoid matching colors exactly. It looks like you’re trying too hard ...” See Artofmanliness.com. Accessed: 16 September 2017. Admittedly Preston’s cravats and pocket squares do show variations that may have him appearing to be trying a little less.

⁴⁹ Although viewers may not (and need not) be aware of the judges’ respective backgrounds, and for the purposes of observational analysis they may not be relevant (see Barthes 1977), it is interesting to note that Mehigan’s training and experience was in French culinary techniques in the UK; in contrast Calombaris’ was in Melbourne (some of his work under Mehigan’s

are presented as people of power, authority and influence, not ‘cooks’. They form a class of culinary superiority that cannot be challenged within the internal world of *MCA*.

The use of costume as an emblem of character of the judges has been a theme since the program’s inception. For example, in the first episode of the program, i.e. S01E01, the judges were presented as in Figure 2.



Figure 2: *MCA* judges, Season 1, E01W01–1.

Mehigan’s vestimentary presentation has remained consistent over the eight seasons of *MCA*. The conservative business-like appearance has been a trademark and remains: the business suit and the open-neck business shirt. Likewise, Preston has also been consistently presented throughout the seasons. Here, the jacket and jeans are similar to those that make appearances occasionally in later years. The cravat as a marker sets him apart from the other judges — again, an anachronistic edge linking him to common perceptions of the ‘dandy’ from past times — is present, albeit in this frame strangely tied. But here

supervision), although, as has been noted, the source of his ‘experimental’ approaches to cooking seem to be highly influenced by such chefs as Heston Blumenthal and Ferran Adrià; and Preston was a journalist in the UK before moving to Australia where he began as a columnist for *TV Week*, subsequently writing restaurant reviews for capital city daily newspapers, and then becoming involved in festival curation.

Calombaris is presented far more casually than is consistent with, say, Season 8. The jeans often appear in later seasons, but usually with a shirt and jacket, or 'smart' casual shirt. Here the cut of the shirt, the rolled sleeves and the neck pendant all mark the 'creative', rebelling against convention. Even so, in Season 8 Calombaris from time to time wears a T-shirt and jeans (although usually not together and never without a jacket). For example, in E39W08–4 the casual nature of the t-shirt is 'straightened' by the jacket and waistcoat (see Figure 3). As another mark of the casual, unconventional, Calombaris also often wears a shirt under a jacket, but with the tails loose, outside the belt of his trousers.



Figure 3: George Calombaris, dressing 'down' and 'up', E39W08–4.

Such dress legitimises Calombaris' characteristically more aggressive approach to contestants — the less formal, more 'street-wise' appearance excuses his loud critical outbursts. Mehigan's more business-like appearance blends with his softer, more mentorial role and manner. Preston, on the other hand, offers mainly suggestions of taste, only occasionally going so far as practical advice. This is fitting given the accentuation, by dress, of his role as the aesthete.

Dress is not only used to distinguish identity traits, but also to separate and visually define the roles of the actors during any activity. In the first Elimination Challenge in Season 8, we see this segregation by dress quite clearly.

The judges present as we have come to expect: Mehigan remains the conservative; Preston dresses, for his wardrobe, almost sombrely but without relinquishing the waistcoat, cravat and pocket square; Calombaris shows a little flair — the creative steak — with floral shirt and waistcoat, but well within the bounds of contemporary ‘smart casual’ (see Figure 4).



Figure 4: *MCA* judges, Elimination Challenge, E05W01–5.

The contestants who have avoided the Elimination Challenge form an audience on the gantry above the cooking area (see Figure 5).



Figure 5: Contestant onlookers, Elimination Challenge, E05W01–5.

Grim-faced, they wear ‘non-working’ clothes — very casual, almost sloppy in comparison to the judges, emphasising not only their role as external onlookers but also their ‘ordinary’ (lower-class) status — having no influence, temporarily, within the action. Today they are placed outside being even *petite bourgeoisie*.

The contestants who are facing a challenge to avoid being eliminated from the competition are rather melodramatically required to wear black aprons.⁵⁰ These, together with black T-shirts create a funereal appearance, suggesting an underclass reminiscent of medieval bans on peasants wearing certain coloured garments (Rösener 1992) (see Figure 6).



Figures 6: Contestants, Elimination Challenge, E05W01–5.

These black aprons contrast dramatically with the white aprons with which successful applicants are presented during auditions at the beginning of the competition, and which contestants wear during phases of the competition that involve pursuing advantage (for example, Mystery Box Challenges, Team Challenges and Invention Tests) rather than avoiding elimination (for example, Pressure Tests and Elimination Challenges). In these activities, whose purpose is in the pursuit of advantage rather than the avoidance of disadvantage, the

⁵⁰ This makes a surprisingly contradictory link to mentor/judge Shannon Bennet, who characteristically wears a black version of chef whites when he is mentoring contestants.

contestants wear shirts that purport to be of their own choosing, usually steering away from dark colours. They are visually distinguished from those under threat of ‘execution’, placed as legitimate members of the contest once again or having successfully redeemed themselves (see Figure 7).



Figure 7: Contestant aprons, Immunity Test E13W03–3.

In Immunity Challenges, in which a contestant cooks against a guest professional chef to win immunity (protection against an Elimination Challenge), the contestant is ‘promoted’ to quasi-chef status by wearing a set of chefs’ whites for the duration of the challenge. This serves as a visual cue to the contestant’s rise in status. Undermining this effect is the occasional casual presentation of the visiting chef. Just as George Calombaris dresses to connote creative flair that transcends formality, so too does guest chef Braden White in E13W03–3. He comes to the kitchen in an unassuming grey apron and white T-shirt. The cue is for casual flair from a street-wise, somewhat hard-bitten (bare tattooed arms) professional outside the conventions of formal presentation (see Figure 8).



Figure 8: Contestant and guest chef aprons, Immunity Challenge E13W03–3.

The wearing of chefs' whites is also used to present the professional status of guests who prepare exemplars to be reproduced in Pressure Tests. Noticeably this badge of distinction was not accorded to Reynold Poernomo, a former contestant, who reappeared in *MCA* as a contributor of an exemplar dessert in Pressure Test, E12W03–2. He appears wearing an apron bearing the name of his dessert bar (see Figure 9).



Figure 9: Guest chef Reynold Poernomo, Pressure Test, E12W03–2.

Chefs' whites are also used to emphasise the distinction between the *MCA* judges and guest judges. In Figure 10, guest Marco Pierre White is distinguished from the judges as a professional working chef.



Figure 10: Marco White as guest judge, Invention Test, E06W02-1.

This distinction is used to form 'sub-classes' within the guest judge 'professional' class. Guest judges Nigella Lawson (Season 8 Week 4) and Maggie Beer (Season 8 Week 6) do not wear chefs' whites. They are presented as a different order of guest — neither has professional training regardless of their success as food celebrities and writers, and, in Maggie Beer's case, as a restaurateur. Their entry into the 'ruling class' of *MCA* comes not from a practical, chef-trained apprenticeship and experience in the lower orders of professional kitchens, but through media celebrity⁵¹ and hospitality business acumen. This distinguishes Lawson and Beer from Calombaris and Mehigan and perhaps points to *MCA*'s divide between 'chef' and 'cook'. This distinction is based upon the professional background of the two 'chef-judges' — a four-year apprenticeship in an approved professional kitchen combined (in Calombaris' case) with a program of formal study. This forms part of Calombaris' celebrity persona both within and outside the *MCA* narrative: the boy from the suburbs, of migrant parents, who has made

⁵¹ Already noted has been Calombaris' objection and subsequent backdown over Nigella Lawson's inclusion as a guest.

his way to the top by talent and hard work.⁵² Ironically, the breadth and depth of Calombaris' business involvement is now such that he would be regarded as a Culinary Administrator rather than a Chef, within the American Culinary Federation's certification designations (American Culinary Federation 2017). Marco Pierre White would also be similarly classified. Their direct involvement in the cooking and day-to-day operation of commercial kitchens is outweighed by their commitment to enterprise management and entrepreneurial activities.

So, not only is the role to be played by each of the actors in *MCA* vestimentarily reinforced, but also by the same means the social status from which that role will be played is delineated within an ideological framework based on a particular view that the judges (and, presumably, the producers) have of the professional culinary industry and the path by which they arrived at their *MCA* status. Of focus here, as Roland Barthes invited, "is not the passage from protection to ornamentation (an illusory shift), but the tendency of every bodily covering to insert itself into an organized, formal and normative system that is recognized by society" (Barthes 1957a).

Proxemics

The structured study and analysis of the social use of space — proxemics — was pioneered by Edward T. Hall, initially in *The Silent Language* (Hall 1959) and subsequently, more definitively in *The Hidden Dimension* (Hall 1966). In the second of these, Hall proposed a hierarchy of psychosocial distances, derived from Hediger's observations of the use of space in birds and mammals (Hediger 1955).

Hall divided the human use of social space into four distances (Hall 1966: 116–125). The first, *intimate distance* (touching to 45 centimetres),⁵³ is that proximity which will allow body contact, for example, hugging at its closest limits to hand-

⁵² This mythic persona is perpetuated via websites such as http://vanyazzahra.blogspot.com.au/2013/06/george-calombaris-biography_14.html and interviews such as <http://www.danivalent.com/curious-george-dani-valent-profiles-chef-george-calombaris/>. For Beer, see <https://www.maggiebeer.com.au/press/package/maggie-beer-biography/item/1373>. All Accessed: 2 October 2017. For Lawson, references are common and widely distributed on web pages — interestingly, her 'official' webpage gives no biographical information. Coincidentally, both Beer and Lawson were introduced to the food industry via family involvements in catering businesses.

⁵³ These measures are Hall's observations for white Anglo-Saxon U.S. Americans in the 1960s. Given these qualifications, quoted distances are a very rough guide only. Hall deals with specific cultural differences, but it would be expected that measures could vary not only within cultural groups but also over time.

shaking at its outer. At this distance vocalisation is characteristically whispers to very quiet speech. The second, *personal distance* (45 centimetres to 1.2 metres), is the distance which allows close social interaction, with bodies separated but still within reach, and quiet conversation (but difficult for others to overhear) is possible. The third, *social distance* (1.2 metres to 3.5 metres), is that distance over which much social interaction takes place, depending upon the familiarity of the participants and the nature of the interaction. For example, impersonal business tends to take place at a larger distance than casual conversation between friends. At the nearest of this distance, impersonal body contact is still possible. The final, and most distant, is *public distance* (3.5 metres and beyond). This is the distance at which formal interaction takes place, the visual connection between social actors is impersonal — the whole body of others is visible — and where dialogue is difficult if at all possible vocal interaction becoming of necessity loud and formal. At this distance, social interaction can be said to be “outside the circle of involvement” (Hall 1966: 123). Hall quotes Theodore H. White’s *The Making of the President 1960* in emphasising the way in which public space is used and adopted as a marker of status — John F. Kennedy was accorded a distance of about nine metres by a group of supporters after his nomination for the presidency was confirmed (p. 124–5). This granting of space can also be observed around figures of royalty and other high-status figures. The British royal family greets commoners on formal occasions from a balcony of a multi-storey building, as does the Pope. Despite the relatively modern attempt to engage as more humble figures by street walks and hand-shaking with supporters these figures of high authority, status and class remain aloof.⁵⁴ *MCA* uses these distances as pointed markers of differences in social status and authority.

Distances here are estimated from screen stills, given that Matt Preston’s height is known to be 1.92 metres. Importantly, high camera angles and/or wide-angle shots are used consistently throughout the program for locating the judges in

⁵⁴ An exceptional breaking down of public distance for authority figures was distinctly deployed in Queen Elizabeth’s walk along the floral tributes left by mourners of Princess Diana’s death in August 1997. The royal family had attracted severe public disapproval over their lack of show of grief, and the walk by the Queen served to re-establish her connection with her subjects. See Morley (2017) for details (although not for analytical comment).

relation to the contestants when addressing them. The effect is to emphasise and increase the perceived distance between the two groups.

The simplest use of personal space and distance is for pragmatic reasons. When first addressing the crowd of applicants in the opening episode of Season 8, the judges stand about 4.5 metres from the crowd. This is consistent with attempting to talk to an audience of over 50 people (see Figure 11).



Figure 11: The *MCA* judges address applicants in E01W01–1.

But even when there are fewer contestants, the judges still maintain this public distance, for example, in when addressing only seven contestants in E51W11–1, at least 4.5 metres separates the judges and contestants (see Figure 12).



Figure 12: The *MCA* judges address seven contestants in E51W11–1.

In the presence of celebrity guest chef Heston Blumenthal, the distance appears to be even greater (see Figure 13).



Figure 13: *MCA* judges and Heston Blumenthal address ten contestants in E41W09–1.

Regardless of the numbers of contestants being addressed, this public distance is maintained, including when tasting the food of individual contestants. In Figure 14, the contestant has walked forward to place his plates on the bench in front of the judges and has then moved back to a prescribed distance. The retreat

is performed stepping backwards, always facing the judges, in a mock presentation to royalty.⁵⁵



Figure 14: The judges taste Harry's food in E46W10–1.

This effect emphasises the power and authority of the judges especially in elimination rounds of the program. For example, when addressing the candidates for elimination in E05W01–5 (see Figure 15), the judges are located at least 6 metres from the three contestants. Meanwhile, the remaining 21 contestants form an audience from a gantry, in a recollection of the cheap seats in traditional theatre or gladiatorial arena. The scene leaves no doubt as to who holds the power and authority, who is endangered and who is a helpless onlooker.

⁵⁵ Here, we need to keep in mind that distances are not a personal reaction of the contestant, as it may appear on-screen, but are dictated by the director of the production.



Figure 15: The *MCA* judges address contestants in Elimination Challenge E05W01–5.

As has be previously discussed, much of the success of *MCA* is put down to its “non-conflictual, comforting and supportive” (Bednarek 2013: 91) nature, and even, superficially at least, “a kind of non-hierarchical, democratic version of Australian ‘ordinariness’ ” (Lewis 2011: 107). Much of this effect is produced by interaction at Edward T. Hall’s intimate distance. The incidence of body contact — most commonly, hugging — within the program is one of the main ways in which attention is distracted from the power and upper-class status that the judges hold.

At the outset of the competition we have a physical demonstration of the divide between the ‘professional’ culinary world — the world of chefs, restaurant entrepreneurs (those with restaurants rather than ‘food dreams’) and connoisseurs of distinction and good taste. In E05W01–5, the first Elimination Challenge of Season 8, Theresa hugs both the other candidates for elimination upon learning she is safe, then hugs her brother — who is also a contestant — and, further, another contestant. When Ashleigh is told he has been eliminated from the competition, Charlie (the other contestant in the Elimination Challenge) hugs Ashleigh, then Theresa and her brother. This then proceeds into the rest of the contestants hugging Ashleigh. The judges stand off, remote, remaining at a public distance from the close grouping of the contestants. The signification is clear — one of their comrades has fallen and the group sadly bids him farewell,

but the figures of power and authority stay aloof. The divide between classes is stark.

By the second Elimination Challenge (E07W02–2) the farewell to, and by, the judges has extended to a handshake, but with the contestant, Nathaniel, reaching across the bench on which the judges tasted the contestants' dishes (see Figure 16).



Figure 16. Judges farewell contestant Nathaniel in E07W02–2.

The bench prevents any possible closer distance to the judges than well into social distance. Body contact is formal and minimal and Nathaniel must lean over the bench to the judges to shake their hands. The judges' also lean in the process but the entry into social space is clearly by the effort of the contestant. Despite the possible modifying influence of guest chef Marco Pierre White, this is a transition from the previous farewell by the judges. And we do not see Nathaniel's farewell to and from the other contestants.

By the next Elimination Challenge (E10W02–5) there is no barrier protecting the personal space of the judges, although the handshakes are taken at a stretch, maintaining social — not entering intimate — distance. The stretch is still uneven — the contestant must lean forward and reach out to shake the judges' hands far more than the judges deign to (see Figure 17).



Figure 17. Contestant Adam shakes hands with the judges in E10W02–5.

However, Adam, the eliminated contestant, is surrounded and hugged by the other contestants as he leaves the *MCA* kitchen (see Figure 18).



Figure 18. Adam is farewelled by the contestants in E10W02–5.

The authority over personal space is clear: contestants enter the personal space of the judges only by invitation, and only to within social distance.

But in E20W04–5, the contestant who is ‘sent home’, Con, strides through a public distance of at least four metres to hug all three judges and also a rather

reluctant Nigella Lawson. Gary Mehigan steps forward in a gesture of approval, George Calombaris leans toward Con as he approaches, but Nigella Lawson stands her ground. Matt Preston reinforces his character with a bear hug (see Figures 19–25). Important here is the significance of Con having identified throughout the contest with his Greek heritage, an identification that is a strong part also of the persona the George Calombaris as a chef. Connected to this are the myths of the ‘emotionally demonstrative Greek’ and the emotional qualities of food and its preparation.



Figures 19–25. Con steps through public space to farewell judges, E20W04–5.

This body contact continues throughout the season's elimination farewells, but when between judge and contestant it is far more usual for the contestant to ask permission, as Theresa does in E25W05–5. In E57W12–2, much later in the contest, Gary Mehigan overtly invites a farewell hug when Trent is eliminated from the contest with the awkward comment, "There's no shaking hands in top six". Both men laugh self-consciously as they hug. Mehigan attempts to demonstrate that the camaraderie that has existed between contestants extends to a special relationship between judges and contestants by the time the competition runs to just six contestants. As the number of contestants diminishes, so Gary Mehigan, at least, invites the remaining contestants to test their heightened status as those who most closely court the unattainable — culinary class mobility.

We are treated to a darker side of this control of personal space by the *MCA* judges when contestants emotionally 'meltdown' — a regular occurrence that displays the pressure of the competition and the commitment of the competitors as well as lending drama to the narrative and an overt expression of power. Usually the contestant is shown to be unable to cope with the activity at hand through emotional stress. They are then counselled by one or (rarely) two judges — normally Calombaris, although guest Marco Pierre White has been introduced to this role. Much more rarely is counselling given by Mehigan or Preston. The advice given is invariably superficial ("You can do this!") and the manner of its delivery 'tough love' ("Get it together, right?").

Nicolette breaks down emotionally in E35W07–5 (the episode in which she is eliminated) upon inadvertently melting her parfait with a blowtorch. George Calombaris approaches to 'counsel' her into persevering. In this case, counselling is a homespun observation on Nicolette's youth (she is 19 years old) and creativity incorporating an overbearing demand to "get it together", almost an unspecific threat.⁵⁶ At the end of the sequence, Calombaris employs an oft-used tactic of judges in *MCA*, the demand of contestants to answer them with "Yes, Chef!" or "Yes, [the judge's name]". This quasi-military demand is often used, especially in team challenges with a judge overseeing the service of multiple

⁵⁶ See Appendix 1 for a transcription and still sequence of this scene.

courses to many diners. It serves to replicate one of the ways in which authority and power is established and maintained within professional kitchens and is a clear demonstration of the absolute dominance of the superior over the inferior. This demand for subservience, and acquiescence by verbally acknowledging the higher authority, perhaps could have some justification in a commercial kitchen. There the pressure for maintaining precise teamwork has significant commercial and economic consequences; the noise and intense activity may otherwise serve to mask the chef's instructions; and moment-by-moment decisions taken by the chef must be acted upon as they are announced in order to keep the flow of service to paying customers. But such a demand in the *MCA* kitchen transcends the coordination of activity. It more becomes an overt reinforcement of the myth of the power and authority of the chef in professional kitchens that is held by the rulers of the *MCA* world, and a demonstration of their belief in the unchallengeable nature of professional power relationships.

Significant is the free invasion of the intimate personal space of the contestant by the judge. Calombaris approaches Nicolette and, clearly shown by the angle of his right arm, grips her left arm. He speaks to her from within about 20 centimetres. When she raises her right arm to shield her eyes — a natural, probably involuntary, reaction to crying within such distance of a relative stranger — he grasps her arms and pulls it away from her face. In all, it is a physical engagement inappropriate in any contemporary workplace.

This physical contact with female contestants is not isolated. When Anastasia suffers a similar breakdown in E37W07–2, George Calombaris approaches his 'counselling' in the same way. Again, the simple "Get it together" is Calombaris' initial advice. The aggressive badgering "You hear me?" is repeated and the encounter finishes with the familiar demand for the contestant to repeat "Yes, George." But here, Calombaris grabs Anastasia by both arms and in Still 6 shakes her as he 'encourages' her. In Still 8 he pushes Anastasia towards her workbench to finish the exchange.⁵⁷ Again, such manhandling could be valid grounds for complaint in any workplace. In the context of *MCA*, it is passed off as part of 'tough love', and as metonym of behaviour in professional kitchens it

⁵⁷ See Appendix 2 for a transcription and still sequence of this scene.

legitimises not only the authority and the power of the executive chef but serves to justify symbolic violence — and even physical violence.

In E57W12–2, contestant Matt breaks down. But in this case George’s counselling takes place across a workbench at the outer extremity of Hall’s social distance. The advice is familiar, “Get it together”, and Matt needs no badgering to defer with “Yes, George”. In fact, George has turned to leave before Matt gives this response.⁵⁸ The difference in the use of personal space to address an emotional crisis is striking. The male contestant is told by the judge, from a social distance and with a physical barrier between them, simply to “get it together”, but the female contestants are badgered within an intimate distance and with uninvited physical contact — interaction at this distance is noted for its close intimacy (not applicable in these instances) or for its extreme aggression (Hall 1966: 118). Thus, it would seem that the exercise and demonstration of power within *MCA* is not only conducted on lines of class, but it is also founded on a base of gender inequality.

Examining just these four sets of signifiers — ingredients, culinary practices, personal presentation, and the use of space — the world of *MasterChef Australia* can be seen to be heavily adorned with symbols of power and authority for one clearly identifiable group, and the exercise of that power and authority, sometimes idiosyncratically, over those of another group. The on-screen world of *MCA* is constructed as a reflection of part the exterior social world, in a way that strongly encourages that exterior to, in turn, be modified by the reflection. The power relationships between those inhabiting the constructed world are an intrinsic part of that reflection and its projection into the external world.

⁵⁸ See Appendix 3 for a transcription and still sequence of this scene.

Conclusion

In examining the representation of class, power and inequality in reality television, the choice of the text for this study, *MasterChef Australia*, has been ideal for a number of reasons. Despite any difficulty in characterising and defining RTV, *MCA* can be clearly recognised as residing in RTV as a makeover–gameshow hybrid anchored within a metonym of the professional restaurant industry. It accentuates the ‘ordinary’ in its selection of its participants and emphasises their amateur status. It also overtly purports to professionally instruct and advance its contestants over the course of a series, in the process having them transcend their ordinary and amateur beginnings. *MCA* is reputed to reflect fundamentals of a mythic Australia character — a socially easygoing impulse to good will, camaraderie and social equality that has been emphasised in academic literature as a unique characteristic of Australian RTV (for example, Bignell 2005) and especially of *MCA* (Bednarek 2013; Lewis 2011; Penberthy 2009; Haarman 2015).

The introduction of Marx, Weber, Barthes and Bourdieu into this examination of representation of class has drawn a clearer picture of how class may be manifested and regarded within television products, also challenging the notions of Australian RTV as classless and egalitarian. The use of class, in this thesis, as a metaphor for the delineation of the exercise of power and authority, and the maintenance of strictly structured patterns of equality, echoes the development of theories of class. The economic theory of class of Marx (1887) was ill-developed (Harvey 2010; and Barnes and Cahill 2012) but was expanded by Weber, who began the process of distinguishing between the economic and social bases for social stratification (Weber 2010). This has been taken up by Bourdieu especially with his theory of the social construction of capital, regarding Marx’s (1887) implied strict economic views as just one of many forms of capital (Bourdieu 1986b). Within this, returning to Roland Barthes’ concept of myth — a form of meta-signification — provided an analytical viewpoint from which to examine emblems of power and authority and the way in which their signification has become depoliticised, that is, naturalised to such an extent that social authority and power become indistinguishable and indivisible from the people holding that power. The reintroduction of these theoretical perspectives in this thesis is also

important in that both Marxist class analysis and Barthes 're-politicisation' of myth have fallen out of favour (see especially Barnes and Cahill 2012) but here have shown their continuing usefulness, especially when integrated with the currently popular theories of Bourdieu (Bourdieu 1986a; Bourdieu 2013).

Also highlighted in this study has been the usefulness of concentrating on elements of signification: metonymy, metaphor, and myth. These transformations from literary theory, through semiotics, have helped elucidate RTV's generally implied claim that its manifestations are, as I would now express it, metonyms of broader, 'natural' situations that exist in general society. *MCA* constantly reinforces this with scenarios, no matter how re-cast for heightened dramatic effect, based on professional situations whose veracity is presented as believable to a general viewing audience. *MasterChef Australia* portrays its competition as a metaphor for the tests and trials that face aspiring food professionals. There are many contestants, but most fail, and even the one who triumphs does not necessarily win acceptance into the circle of professional chefs. The myths of *MCA* encompass not only the ultimate authority and power of the professional chef but also the legitimacy of the inequality between groups of participants in the program's narrative — regardless of the occasional admission that a contestant has produced 'restaurant-quality' food, the distance between judges and contestants, professionals and amateurs, is beyond question and beyond testing. Also exposed is the myth of *MCA* as a vehicle for personal transformation and as a path to neoliberal self-actualisation. Direct instruction and mentoring in *MCA* is minimal — confined to a few 'Masterclasses' produced as add-ons to the competition itself. Otherwise, the foundation of the program as a competition is squarely built on the creative culinary talents of the contestants. Throughout *MCA*, the judges are mostly at pains to avoid instructing the contestants, predominantly questioning the wisdom of choices made by contestants. Sometimes alternatives will be suggested, but this largely occurs in Immunity Challenges when Shannon Bennett acts as mentor for the contestant during the cook-off against a professional chef.

The textual reading of *MCA* presented here has revealed that class, inequality and power are not hidden — for example, as Lewis suggests, by open display of ethnicity (Lewis 2011: 108) — but are overt, consistent and enduring. This is

demonstrated through the social elevation of ‘professionals’ over ‘amateurs’ in the program through the four emblems of signification that have been emphasised here: ingredients, cuisine and technique, personal presentation, and the use of space. Contestants are called to work with ingredients beyond their amateur experience (and beyond the normal experience of most home cooks and even some professional chefs) under the assumption that the professionals understand the intricacies and possibilities of working with the esoteric, unusual or (normally) unaffordable. The program’s emphasis on *haute cuisine*, both in ingredients and technique maintains the distinction, and superior taste and skills of the professionals. On occasions, challenges have dipped into more mundane cooking styles but inevitably the results sought by the judges have been squarely within *haute*, rather than everyday, cuisine. The personal presentation of *MCA*’s participants — both judges and contestants — has been shown to be a strong element in establishing the personae and role of the individuals. Especially notable is the dress of judge Matt Preston — flamboyant suits (long morning coats and often multi-coloured trousers), pocket squares and cravats. In an archaic upper-class manner, he is almost cartoonishly established as a man of taste and distinction. George Calombaris presents as the hard-bitten working-class boy made good, and Gary Mehigan as the mild-mannered culinary mentor. Even more striking is the manner in which the participants of *MCA* are arranged in space. Distances maintained between judges and contestants are sometimes comparable to those that have separated royalty from their subjects. This choreography is clear, distinct and constant. Here, the emblems of class, authority and power have been restricted, but in further research alternative or additional emblems could be explored. Haptics — the study of touch — has been considered as a part of the use of space here, but could be introduced at a more focused level. Kinesics — body movement — could introduce detailed discussion of the signification of such thing as the stylised placing of elements in plating food; and paralinguistic study could be employed to reveal signification on a vocal non-linguistic basis.





Overall, *MCA* stands as a clear example of Bourdieu’s symbolic violence: “violence wielded with tacit complicity between its victims and its agents, insofar as both remain unconscious of submitting to or wielding it” (Bourdieu 2001: 246).





The symbolic violence of the inequality and exercise of power during the program has been made clear. But this study also revealed instances of verbal and physical violence — behaviour that would not be countenanced in professional workplaces. In *MCA*, this was occasioned with the implicit consent of the victim and assumed privilege of the perpetrator. The instance of physical violence highlighted here involving a female victim was contrasted to a similar situation with a male contestant that did not involve physical contact. Such physical expressions of power and superiority are rare in *MCA*, but nevertheless emphasise the extremes to which the assumption of authority can extend. The appearance of apparent differences in the exercise of authority over contestants by gender raises questions of how further or deeper such differences may be. Further analysis of differences in interactions between the dominant and submissive according to gender, as one example here highlighted, could also be developed in future studies.





The characteristics of the constructed worlds in *RTV* are also prime for study. Precisely how do the parameters of these worlds hide, express and legitimise the assumption and granting of power and the submission to it? What precisely is the metonymic relationship between *RTV* scenarios and particular external social or professional circumstances? Are *RTV* scenarios offered as metonyms of social myths rather than metonyms of social circumstances? And more broadly, how can the conduct of external social events be explained as a reflection of the characteristics *RTV* worlds? For example, could *RTV* scenarios be analysed sufficiently accurately so as to be seen as a template for the Trump 2016 political campaign? In the process, the reintroduction of the theories and analytical methods of Roland Barthes, proved to be particularly useful here, could be further introduced to those of Pierre Bourdieu to better consolidate a contemporary integrated approach to textual analysis.





Appendices


Appendix 1: Nicolette's breakdown, E35W07-5

1. GEORGE: Look at me.	 A medium shot of George, a bald man with a beard wearing a dark suit and blue shirt, looking intently at Nicolette, a woman with dark hair in a ponytail wearing a black chef's uniform. They are in a kitchen setting. A 'tenplay' logo is visible in the top right corner.
2. GEORGE: ... Oi. Don't lose it now ...	 A medium shot of George and Nicolette. George is looking at Nicolette, who is looking down. The background shows kitchen shelves with various items. A 'tenplay' logo is visible in the top right corner.
3. GEORGE: ... Okay? You hear me?	 A medium shot of George and Nicolette. George is looking at Nicolette, who is looking down. The background shows kitchen shelves with various items. A 'tenplay' logo is visible in the top right corner.
4. GEORGE: Oi!	 A medium shot of George and Nicolette. George is looking at Nicolette, who is looking down. The background shows kitchen shelves with various items. A 'tenplay' logo is visible in the top right corner.

<p>5.</p> <p>GEORGE: Come on, don't lose it now. Right?</p>	 A close-up shot of Nicolette, a woman with dark hair, looking down with a sad expression. She is wearing a black top. The background is a kitchen setting with shelves and a 'tenplay' logo in the top right corner.
<p>6.</p> <p>GEORGE: Yeah? You're just cooking food.</p>	 A medium shot of George and Nicolette in a kitchen. George is on the right, looking at Nicolette on the left. They are both wearing black tops. The background shows kitchen shelves and a 'tenplay' logo in the top right corner.
<p>7.</p> <p>GEORGE: You know how you love cooking at home?</p> <p>NICOLETTE: Yeah, I know.</p> <p>GEORGE: And it makes you happy?</p>	 A close-up shot of Nicolette, looking down with a sad expression. She is wearing a black top. The background is a kitchen setting with shelves and a 'tenplay' logo in the top right corner.
<p>8.</p> <p>GEORGE: And you've ... you've done that ...</p>	 A medium shot of George and Nicolette in a kitchen. George is on the right, looking at Nicolette on the left. They are both wearing black tops. The background shows kitchen shelves and a 'tenplay' logo in the top right corner.


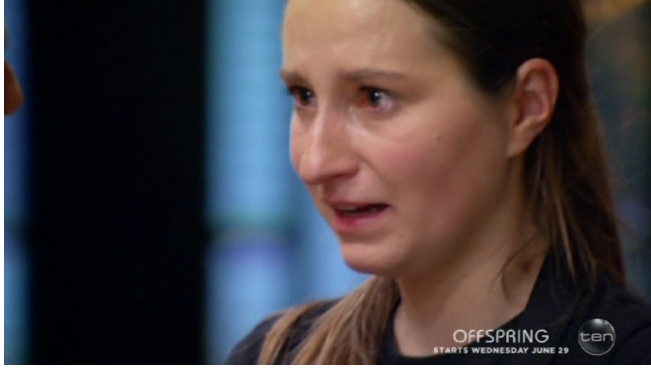


<p>9.</p> <p>GEORGE: ... in this competition. You've given us great desserts.</p>	
<p>10.</p> <p>NICOLETTE (NODS)</p> <p>GEORGE: You know, you're nineteen years of age, Nicolette.</p>	
<p>11.</p> <p>GEORGE: At nineteen I had no idea about creativity. And here you are at nineteen. Can you imagine what's gonna happen at 29?</p>	
<p>12.</p> <p>GEORGE: You need to focus now. You hear me? Look at me.</p>	

<p>13.</p> <p>GEORGE: You hear me?</p> <p>NICOLETTE (NODS)</p> <p>GEORGE: No more tears.</p> <p>Get it together ...</p>	
<p>14.</p> <p>GEORGE: ... and put up a great dish. And you can do it.</p>	
<p>15.</p> <p>GEORGE: And you've got elements. And start pulling it together, You hear me?</p> <p>NICOLETTE (NODS): Yeah.</p> <p>GEORGE: Yes, George?</p>	
<p>16.</p> <p>NICOLETTE (NODDING):</p> <p>Yes, George.</p> <p>GEORGE: Yes, George?</p> <p>NICOLETTE: Yep.</p>	

<p>17.</p> <p>GEORGE: C'mon, let's do it.</p>	
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Appendix 2: Anatasia's breakdown E37W08-2




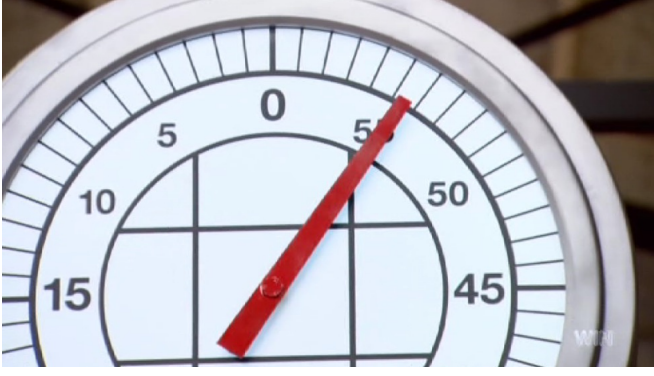
<p>1.</p> <p>GEORGE: Look at me ... look at me. Get it together ... (ANATASIA SOBS) ... You hear me? ...</p>	
<p>2.</p> <p>GEORGE: ... Right? You're gonna let this go.</p> <p>ANATASIA: No!</p> <p>GEORGE: ... Aren't you?</p> <p>ANATASIA: I don't want to.</p> <p>GEORGE: So stop crying ...</p>	
<p>3.</p> <p>GEORGE: ... You don't need a recipe. Just use a bit of intuition now.</p>	





<p>4.</p> <p>ANATASIA: Okay.</p> <p>GEORGE: You know how you cook with that free-style nature?</p>	
<p>5.</p> <p>ANATASIA: Yes.</p> <p>GEORGE: That needs to come into play.</p>	
<p>6.</p> <p>GEORGE (SHAKING ANATASIA): Come on you can do it ...</p>	
<p>7.</p> <p>GEORGE: ... You hear me?</p>	





<p>8.</p> <p>GEORGE: ... Yes, George?</p> <p>ANASTASIA: Yes, George.</p> <p>GEORGE: Come on. Let's go.</p>	
<p>9.</p>	

Appendix 3: Matt's breakdown E57W12-2

<p>1.</p> <p>GEORGE: How you going?</p>	
<p>2.</p> <p>MATT: Having a nightmare.</p> <p>GEORGE: Whaddya mean you're having a nightmare?</p> <p>MATT: It's rubbish. It's just ... I dunno ...</p>	

<p>3.</p> <p>CHRISTIE: Take a deep breath, you go with your [muffled]</p>	 A medium shot of two people in a kitchen. On the left, a man with a shaved head wearing a dark blazer over a purple shirt. On the right, a woman with dark hair wearing a white chef's coat with a red logo. She is gesturing with both hands as if speaking. The background shows kitchen equipment and shelves.
<p>4.</p> <p>MATT: Yeah, I'm just frustrated with myself.</p> <p>GEORGE: Yeah, that's okay, you're frustrated because you want things to be right. I get that ...</p>	 A close-up shot of a man with a tattoo on his right arm, wearing a black t-shirt with a white logo. He is leaning over a white counter, possibly a sink or prep area, and appears to be focused on a task. The background is slightly blurred, showing the kitchen environment.
<p>5.</p> <p>GEORGE: ... But right now, you've got, how many hours to go? ...</p>	 A wide shot of the kitchen. Three people are visible: the man in the blazer on the left, the woman in the chef's coat in the center, and the man in the black t-shirt on the right. They are standing around a counter with various kitchen items. The kitchen has wooden floors and stainless steel equipment.
<p>6.</p> <p>GEORGE: ... Three hours.</p> <p>MATT: Yeah.</p>	 A close-up shot of a round analog timer with a white face and black markings. The numbers 0, 5, 10, 15, 45, and 50 are visible. A red needle points to the 5-minute mark. The timer is mounted on a surface.

<p>7.</p> <p>GEORGE: Do you know what you can do in three hours?</p>	 A medium shot of George Calantoni, a bald man with a goatee wearing a dark blazer over a plaid shirt. He is looking slightly to his right with a serious expression. The background is a kitchen with warm lighting and wooden shelves.
<p>8.</p> <p>MATT (EXAGGERATED BREATH OUT)</p>	 A close-up shot of Matt Moran, a man with short brown hair and a blue earring, wearing a black chef's jacket. He is looking down intently at something out of frame. The background is a kitchen.
<p>9.</p> <p>GEORGE: That is totally up to you ... yeah? ...</p>	 A wide shot of a kitchen. George Calantoni is on the left, looking towards the center. A woman in a white chef's coat stands in the middle. Matt Moran is on the right, leaning over a counter and working with ingredients. The kitchen has wooden floors and shelves.
<p>10.</p> <p>GEORGE: ... and your willingness to walk that tightrope ...</p>	 A medium shot of George Calantoni, similar to the first image. He is looking slightly to his right with a serious expression. The background is a kitchen with warm lighting and wooden shelves.

<p>11.</p> <p>GEORGE: ... Stay balanced. You have to go for it, man.</p>	
<p>12.</p> <p>GEORGE: Get it together.</p>	
<p>13.</p> <p>MATT: Yup. CHRISTY: Yup.</p>	
<p>14.</p> <p>MATT: Yes, George.</p>	

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